

*PART ONE: ORIGINS AND ARRIVALS*



**Figure 1.1: West Central African Village Scene** (from Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi, *Istorica Descrizione de'tre regni Congo, Matamba ed Angola*, Bologna, 1681).

## ***1.0 The African Burial Ground: New York's First Black Institution***

### ***1.1 Introduction***

When the archaeological team disinterred the remains of the woman later designated as Burial 340 in 1991, the waist beads and hourglass-shaped, filed incisors that had adorned her in life remained to define her culturally more than two centuries after death. Nearby, in Burial 254, a young child reposed in its final resting-place, with a silver earring strung like a pendant around its tiny neck. The man whose bones imprinted the soil in Burial 101 had been laid to rest in a simple coffin, but someone had painstakingly fashioned a heart-shaped object on its lid with brass tacks. And in Burial 25, a young woman's broken body—face shattered, wrist fractured, and rib cage penetrated by a still present musket ball—provided evidence of the violence that pervaded colonial New York.<sup>1</sup>

These four representatives of the community of African and African-descended peoples in the city, rendered anonymous as a consequence of their enslavement, remind us that even among those designated property, humanity prevailed. For in death (as in life) their membership in the human family resonated. The careful laying to rest of remains in a sacred spot such as the African Burial Ground underscores the resolve of African peoples to maintain a sense of dignity and to honor cherished customs, even in the midst of extraordinary assaults on their humanity.

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<sup>1</sup> For discussion of the characteristics of individual burials see "The New York African Burial Ground Skeletal Biology Final Report," eds. Michael L. Blakey and Lesley Rankin-Hill, November, 2004.

## 1.2 *Burial in the Common*

As with other African peoples, both in the diaspora and on the continent, New York Africans found meaning in their lives through participation in long-established rituals handed down from one generation to the next. While their enslavement limited their ability to continue such practices openly, they nevertheless found ways to keep some aspects of these rituals alive. Rituals associated with death and burial were especially significant and provided a way in which a people from diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences could forge a common identity.

Prior to the arrival of the British, New York Africans had access to few sites where they could bury their dead. Doubtless, a small number found a final resting-place at the Stuyvesant bowery (or farm) where they had labored. Others may have been laid to rest in the common burying ground at Bowling Green, the city's first public cemetery, which had been in use from approximately 1649 to 1673.<sup>2</sup> A second burial ground served the New York community during the last quarter of the seventeenth century, but by 1697 its acquisition as private property by Trinity Church led to the denial of burials to Africans. The ban stipulated that:

...no Negroes be buried within the bounds & Limitts of the church yard of Trinity Church, that is to say, in the rear of the present burying place & that no person or Negro whatsoever, do presume... to break up any ground for the burying of his Negro, as they will answer it at their peril...<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Liber Patents, 2:20; Liber Deeds, 12:85, 90 and 13:102. New York State Archives, Albany.

<sup>3</sup> See Trinity Church Vestry Minutes, October 25, 1697, cited in I.N. Phelps Stokes, *Iconography of Manhattan Island, 1498-1909*. 6 vols. (New York: R. H. Dodd, 1915-1928, reprint New York: Arno Press, 1967), 4:403.

Given this ban, it is likely that a separate site existed for African people before the end of the century.

Although the first documentary evidence for the existence of the African Burial Ground appears to be the 1712 statement made by Chaplain John Sharpe that the Africans were “buried in the Common,”<sup>4</sup> other factors also point to the possibility that the property had become sacred ground for New York Africans well before this time. A community of African peoples had begun to form at least as early as the 1640s, when the Dutch granted conditional freedom to a group of black men and women. The burial ground that was identified by Sharpe was near lands granted initially to members of that earlier group. David Valentine, nineteenth-century city clerk and compiler of New York City history, described the site as a “desolate, unappropriated spot, descending with a gentle declivity towards a ravine which led to the Kalkhook [in English, Collect or Fresh Water] pond”<sup>5</sup> (see Map 1.1 and 1.2). Such a site—located as it was outside of the town but within a mile of the southern tip of Manhattan—would have met the needs and preferences of the African population without attracting the displeasure of New York’s whites.<sup>6</sup> The cemetery would have served as one of the first institutions over which the early New York African population had relative control.

Despite its significance to them, New York Africans never gained title to the burial ground. The site (whether already containing the cemetery or not) would have been

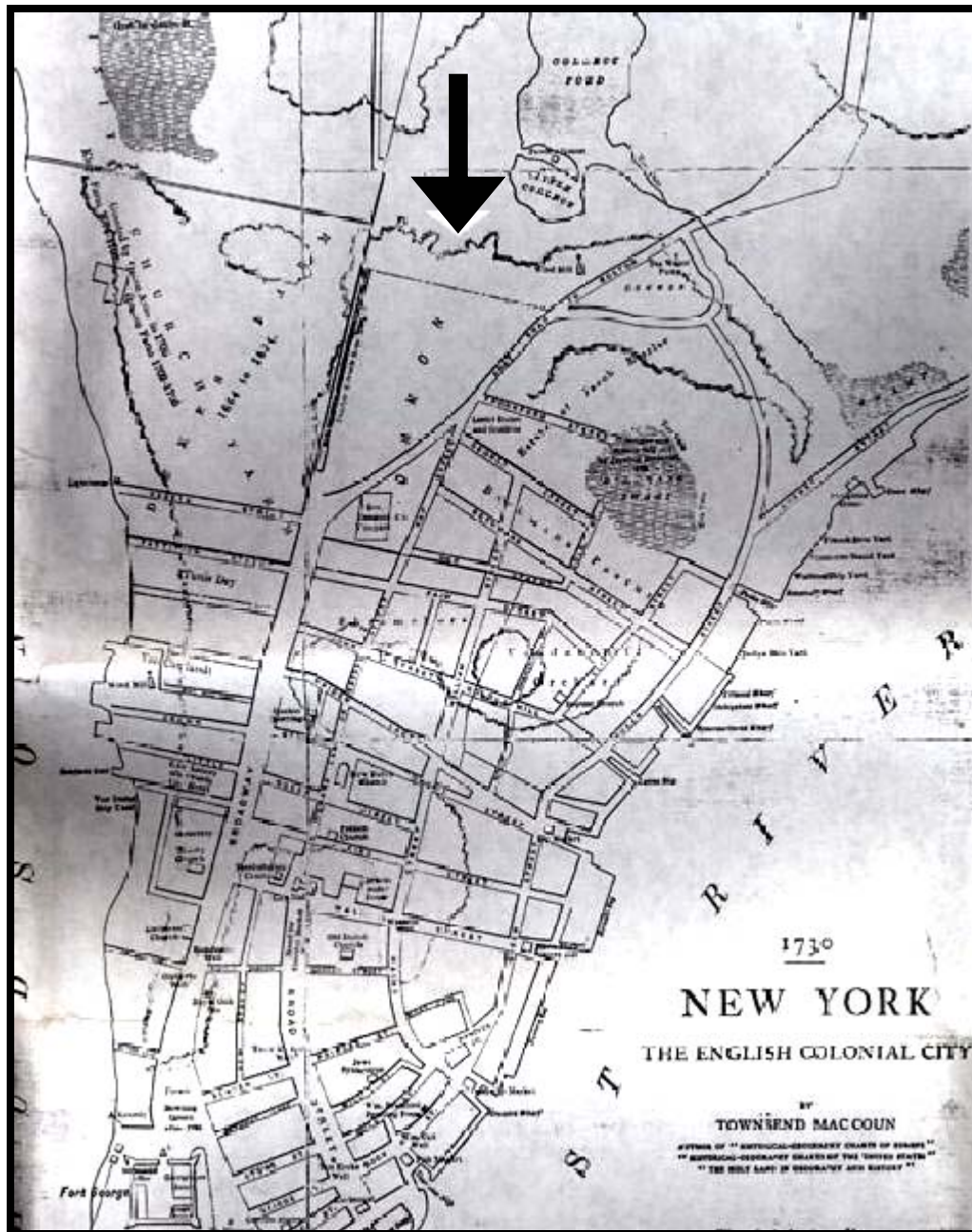
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<sup>4</sup> Rev. John Sharpe, “Proposals for Erecting a School, Library and Chapel at New York,” in *Collections*, New York Historical Society (1880), 13:355.

<sup>5</sup> David T. Valentine, compiler, *Manual of the Corporation of New York*, published annually, 1847-66 (1860), 567.

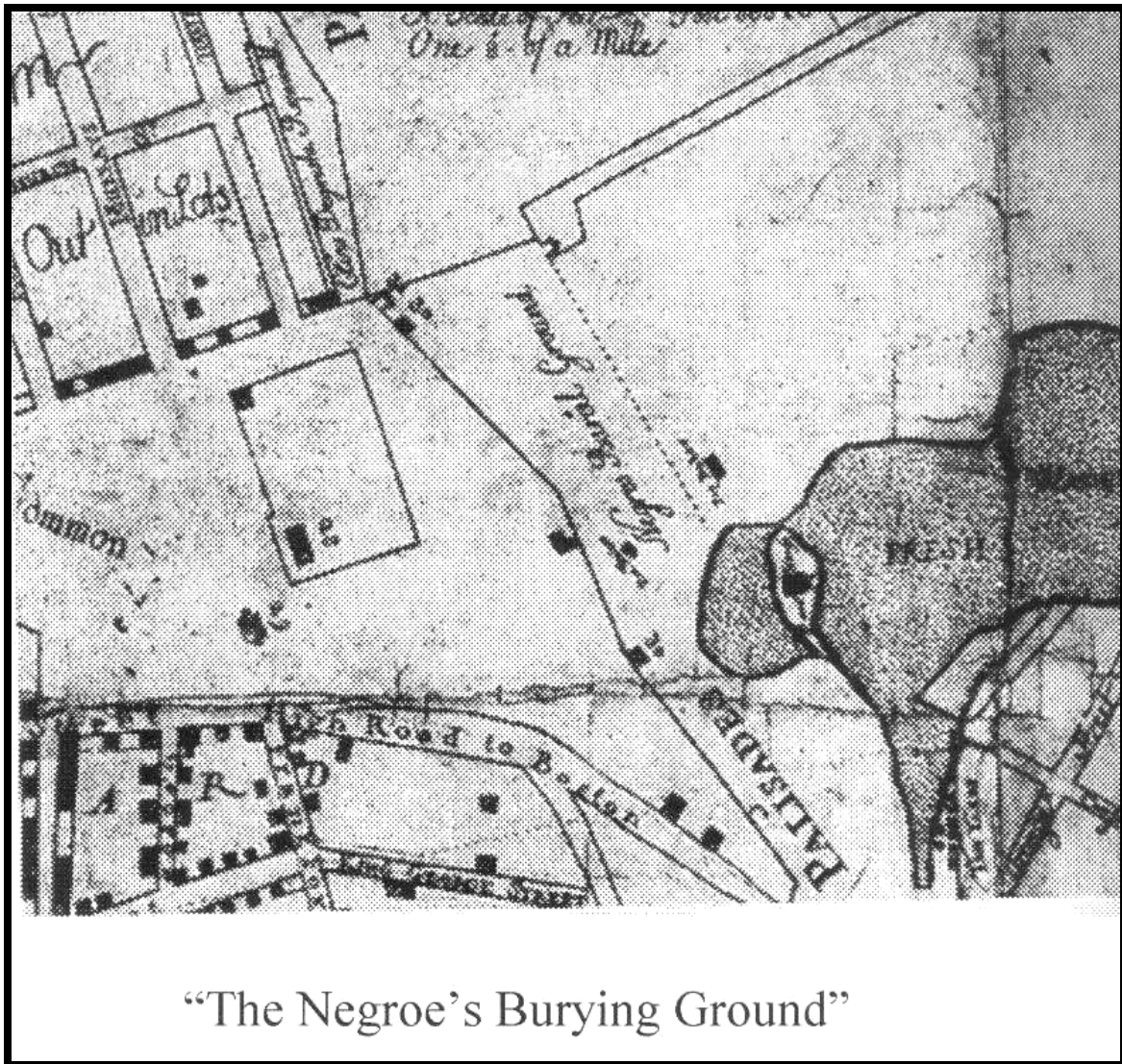
<sup>6</sup> The following discussion is intended to be a brief review of the history of the site. A comprehensive site history appears in “Report of the Archaeology Component of the New York African Burial Ground Project,” eds. Warren Perry and Jean Howson, March 2004, chap. 2.

part of lands granted in 1673 to Cornelius Van Borsum. The grant was issued on behalf of Van Borsum's wife, Sarah Roelof, in recognition of her services as an interpreter in



**Map 1.1: Townsend MacCoun Map of New York in 1730, showing the Collect Pond and the Common, which lay northeast and south of the burial ground, respectively. The African Burial Ground, which does not appear on the map, is represented by the arrow (from Stokes, *Iconography of Manhattan Island*, vol. 1).**

negotiations between Native Americans and Dutch officials. Roelof's death in 1693 began a long-standing dispute between her heirs and city officials that was not resolved



**Map 1.2: Partial view of the Maerschallck Map (1763), indicating “Negroes Burial Ground” (from Stokes, *Iconography of Manhattan Island*, vol. 1).**

until the late-eighteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Extant records provide no explanation for the origins of the use of the land for a black cemetery, and give no indication of why the African community was permitted throughout the eighteenth century to appropriate the land as a burial ground. Apparently, the land's remoteness for much of the period it was in use and its lack of commercial value until well into the eighteenth century discouraged any challenge to New York Africans simply taking over the site for their own use.

Eventually, lack of title to the land disadvantaged Africans. Keeping their burial ground sacred posed a challenge, as it bordered the Common, which supported cattle grazing in the Dutch period and, during eighteenth-century British rule, served as a site for executions, public events, and the city's first almshouse with its own cemetery.<sup>8</sup> Although commercial development of the land did not occur until the late-eighteenth century, the owners leased portions of the grant for the establishment of a pottery works, while tanneries, breweries and other businesses dotted the area near the cemetery. The British interred deceased prisoners of war at the southern end of the site during the American Revolution. A few years later, grave-robbing medical students seeking "material" on which to practice their skills, desecrated the site. In the 1790s, after years of overuse, the burial ground closed. In preparation for development, the site was filled over and subdivided into lots.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> "Report of the Site-Specific History of Block 154," ed. Thelma Foote et al., New York, August 25, 1993, 11-12. See also "Draft Environmental Impact Statement," Foley Square Proposed Federal Courthouse and Federal Municipal Office Building, New York City, New York. Vol. 2, Edwards and Kelcey Engineering, Inc., Appendix B: Ingle et al, A Stage 1A Cultural Resource Survey to the proposed Foley Square Project in the Borough of Manhattan, New York, New York, 1990; and Stokes, *Iconography*, 6:82-83, 123.

<sup>8</sup> See "Report of the Site-Specific History of Block 154" and "Draft Environmental Impact Statement."

<sup>9</sup> "Draft Environmental Impact Statement," 11-12.

Over the years, New York transformed from town to city to bustling metropolis. Yet, graphic reminders of the African colonial presence resurfaced when construction crews unearthed human remains at the site. The 1991-92 disinterment and the confluence of events that ultimately led to the establishment of the African Burial Ground Project provided the avenue by which Africans and African-descended people, long dead, could provide clues to their experiences in the colonial city.



## ***2.0 The Quest for Labor--From Privateering to “Honest” Trade***

### ***2.1 Introduction***

The men, women, and children who were laid to rest in the burial ground were part of the African odyssey that began as a consequence of European rivalries and expansion in the Americas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Initially, Dutch interests centered on an illicit trade with Spanish colonies in the Caribbean and along certain stretches of the South American coast. Depending on the area, the Dutch swapped salt, pelts, sugar, tobacco, and wood for European goods.<sup>10</sup> Concomitantly, privateering proved lucrative, as the Dutch (along with England and France) attacked Spanish and Portuguese ships. By 1621, the Dutch elected to expand their presence into North America by establishing a trading post in the Hudson River Valley under the auspices of the West India Company. The object of initial interest was the very profitable fur trade, which they conducted with local native groups. Eventually, however, that early interest in the fur trade evolved into a commitment to colonization. Despite the establishment of a permanent settlement in the area, the village remained small both in physical size and population in its first decade of existence and crept slowly northward in the following decades.

### ***2.2 Native Inhabitants***

The site the Dutch occupied in 1624 was a forested area that had been inhabited for centuries by native peoples known as the Lenape. The group had established at least two

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<sup>10</sup> Cornelis Goslinga, *The Dutch in the Caribbean and on the Wild Coast, 1580-1680* (Gainesville, Florida: University of Florida Press, 1971), 55.

seasonal camps in the vicinity—one at the southern tip of Manhattan, which was called Kapsee and the other a short distance away, known as Werpoes.<sup>11</sup> Other villages dotted the landscape on either side of the island. The Lenape routinely evacuated these sites during the colder months and returned to them when conditions permitted. As one observer declared later in the century, the Lenape lived “very rudely and rovingly, shifting from place to place, according to their exigencies, and gains of fishing and fowling and hunting, never confining their rambling humors in any settled Mansions.”<sup>12</sup>

With the arrival of the Dutch, the Lenape way of life underwent irrevocable transformation. In exchange for pelts, the Dutch offered to the native inhabitants a variety of common European goods, including knives, axes, hoes, blankets, brass kettles, combs, guns, and alcohol.<sup>13</sup> A new disease environment, technology, and newly forged trade relationships challenged the independence and self-sufficiency the native people had enjoyed before the Dutch entered their world.<sup>14</sup>

### 2.3 *From Trading Post to Settlement*

The transition of New Amsterdam from a place to facilitate the trade in furs to a permanent settlement was neither immediate nor easy; the West India Company’s firm hold (it owned the land and livestock, and later the enslaved African laborers)

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<sup>11</sup> This Lenape site was located near Kalch-hook (Collect or Fresh Water) Pond. See “Report on the Site Specific History of Block 154,” 1 and 6.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 6.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 12 and 24.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of these earliest inhabitants of Manhattan Island and the changes they experienced as a consequence of the Dutch arrival, see also “Report on Site-Specific History of Block 154,” 1-3.

discouraged colonists who preferred to labor for themselves. Growth of the settlement was aided somewhat by the arrival of Walloons (French Protestants) in the first couple of years of its existence, but the area remained sparsely populated. In 1626 its less than 300 residents could boast only of a town that had an unimpressive fort, just over two dozen cabins, and a gristmill.<sup>15</sup> A succession of directors proved unpopular and ineffective in bringing stability and prosperity to the settlement. A dozen years after its establishment, the population had increased by no more than 100, and there had been only modest additions to building construction.<sup>16</sup>

Critical to the development of the site as a permanent settlement was the establishment of farms where laborers could grow cereal grains and vegetables and raise livestock. The Company leased these farms to its own officials and to private individuals whose cultivation of the land fed the local inhabitants.<sup>17</sup> But adequate food production was hampered by the paucity of laborers. Sporadic immigration inclined the Company to accept laborers from wherever it could find them, hence enhancing the settlement's diversity, but providing no long-term solution to a growing and increasingly critical problem.

## 2.4 *African Arrival*

Shortly after settling New Amsterdam, the Company had availed itself of the opportunity to ease its labor shortage by the acquisition of eleven African men. The

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<sup>15</sup> Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 24.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>17</sup> Esther Singleton, *Dutch New York* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1909), 16-17. See also Oliver A. Rink, *Holland on the Hudson: An Economic and Social History of Dutch New York* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986); and Willie Page, *The Dutch Triangle* (New York: Garland Press, 1997).

specific date and circumstances of their arrival remain points of conjecture, although many historians have accepted as plausible the date 1626, as the African petitioners for freedom in 1644 claimed that they had been in the colony for 18-19 years.<sup>18</sup> Records of Dutch privateering raids, however, suggest a later date. On January 13, 1627, the *Bruynvis*, a vessel in the service of the West India Company that raided Spanish and Portuguese shipping in the Caribbean, left the Dutch port of Amsterdam on a privateering venture. Upon arriving in the Caribbean, it assisted in the capture of a Portuguese bark whose cargo consisted of tobacco and 150 captives. The only documentation extant regarding its activities noted that the tobacco was taken, but the privateers “let the rest of the people go.”<sup>19</sup> Before its return across the Atlantic at the end of the year, the *Bruynvis* swung north to the colony of New Netherland.<sup>20</sup>

The release of captured Africans from Portuguese and Spanish prizes in the early 1600s reflected Dutch prohibition on involvement in the slave trade.<sup>21</sup> But release of the cargo would not have precluded seizure of the crew. The Portuguese were known to have employed Luso-Africans onboard their ships. Privateers would have been eager to make

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<sup>18</sup> In challenging the 1626 date, Robert Swan has suggested a later arrival, but before August 11, 1628 when Domine Jonas Michaelius, the first pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church, made reference to Africans in the settlement of New Amsterdam. See Swan, “First Africans into New Netherland, 1625 or 1626?” *De Halve Maen* 66/4 (1993):75-82.

<sup>19</sup> Johannes de Laet, *Het Iaerlyck Verhael* (mod ed. S.P.L’Honoré Naber, 1931) 1:21.

<sup>20</sup> Nationaalarchief (Netherlands) Oude West Indische Compagnie, vol. 20 (Minutes of Zeeland Chamber), fol. 119v.

<sup>21</sup> See *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America*, ed. Elizabeth Donnan, 4 vols. (New York: Octagon Books, 1969), 3:410. Donnan indicates that the Dutch did not know what to do with these captives. She cites three instances in which such cargoes were let go in the period from 1624 to 1631. See also Pieter Emmer, “The History of the Dutch Slave Trade,” *Journal of Economic History* 32 (June-December, 1972), 728.

use of any seamen they encountered, including those of African descent.<sup>22</sup> Although extant records do not permit us to conclude that the *Brunyvis* did indeed introduce the first Africans to New Amsterdam, the privateer may have released the human cargo, seized part or all of the crew, impressed them into service, and later transported them to the West India Company in New Amsterdam. We do know that three years later, the *Brunyvisch* transported 50 enslaved people to Pavonia (New Jersey) that had been captured in a prize.<sup>23</sup>

Whether or not the eleven men arrived in New Amsterdam onboard the *Brunyvis*, their names suggest familiarity with the larger Atlantic world. According to extant sources, the men likely were those who received conditional freedom in 1644: Paulo Angola, Groot (Big) Manuel, Cleyn (Little) Manuel, Manuel de Gerrit de Reus, Simon Congo, Anthony Portugis, Gracia, Peter Santome, Jan Francisco, Cleyn Antony, and Jan Fort Orange.<sup>24</sup> Within a few years, three African women (including one named Mayken) arrived, essentially to perform the drudge work that characterized seventeenth-century domestic labor.<sup>25</sup>

These early imports inured primarily to the benefit of the Dutch West India Company, which owned the laborers. Private ownership did not become immediately

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<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of black participation on board privateers and other ships during this era see Lisa Y. King, "Privateering and Piracy in the Seventeenth Century," [unpublished paper]. See also W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks :African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

<sup>23</sup> King, "Privateering and Piracy in the Seventeenth Century," 5; Stokes, *Iconography*, 6:501.

<sup>24</sup> *Laws and Ordinances of New Netherland, 1638-1674*, trans. E.B. O'Callaghan (Albany: Weed, Parsons and Company, 1868), 36.

<sup>25</sup> On April 19, 1663, Mayken, an ill and elderly black woman, "having served as a slave since the year 1628," petitioned the West India Company for and was granted her freedom. See Council Minutes, [vol. 10, pt. 2], *Calendar of Dutch Historical Manuscripts in the Office of the Secretary of State* (Albany: Weed, Parsons and Company, 1866), 246.

commonplace, despite individual and collective entreaties from colonists and Company promises to resolve the incessant labor shortage by importing enslaved Africans for their use. As early as 1629, the Company pledged to “endeavor to supply the colonists with as many blacks as it possibly can....”<sup>26</sup> And sometime between 1630 and 1635, under its “New Project of Freedoms and Exemptions,” it indicated that it would “allot to each Patroon twelve Black men and women out of the prizes in which Negroes shall be found.”<sup>27</sup>

In the ensuing years, privateers in the service of the West India Company continued to supply New Amsterdam with captives whom Portuguese suppliers in Africa sent to the Spanish Indies to fulfill their *asiento* contract (or license to supply enslaved African laborers). Virtually all of those arriving in this manner during the Dutch period came from West Central Africa.<sup>28</sup> Although the Dutch West India Company did substantial trade with West Africa from its inception in 1621, shipping lists reveal that no captives were among the Company’s purchases between 1624 and 1636.<sup>29</sup> The Company decided to initiate the direct purchase of enslaved laborers in the latter year, and the earliest voyages organized for this purpose went out in 1638 to Soyo (Kingdom of

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<sup>26</sup> *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade*, 3: 410.

<sup>27</sup> *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York*, (hereinafter *DRCHNY*), eds. Edmund B. O’Callaghan and Berthold Fernow, 15 vols. (Albany: Weed, Parson, 1856-87), 1:99.

<sup>28</sup> Johannes de Laet, *Het Iaerlyck Verhael van de Verrichtinghen de Geotroyeerde West-Indische Compagnie in derthien Boecken*, 3 vols. (The Hague: Martinus Nihoff, 1931), *passim*. In this detailed chronicle of the privateering activities of the West India Company between 1624 and 1636, de Laet indicates that all of the nine slave-bearing ships that have a provenance (three are listed without a provenance) were from Angola. The total number of enslaved people taken from such ships during this period was 2,356. According to Enriqueta Vila Vilar, in *Hispanoamerica y el comercio de esclavos* (Seville, 1977), *Quadro 4*, West Central Africans made up about 70 percent of the Asiento trade between 1616 and 1640, and in five of those years, they accounted for 100 percent of the captives in the trade.

<sup>29</sup> Universitetsbiblioteket Uppsala (Sweden) MS L 123, fols. 59-65, with records of 104 voyages to all parts of Africa.

Kongo).<sup>30</sup> The first West African voyages did not begin until 1639 when various Dutch ships loaded 688 enslaved people purchased in Allada to send to Brazil.<sup>31</sup> Shortly after the Dutch occupied parts of Brazil (specifically Pernambuco)<sup>32</sup> in 1644, the Board of Accounts on New Netherland indicated that

for the advancement of the cultivation of the land, it would not be unwise to allow, at the request of the patroons, Colonists and other farmers, the introduction from Brazil of as many Negroes as they would be disposed to pay for at a fair price...which Negroes would accomplish more work for the masters and at a less expense than from servants, who must be bribed to go thither by a great deal of money and promises.<sup>33</sup>

Shortly thereafter, the *Tamandare* arrived in New Amsterdam from Brazil with a cargo of enslaved laborers of unknown quantity. Apparently, it did not fulfill the needs of the residents of New Amsterdam, as the Directors wrote: “We have seen that more negroes could be advantageously employed and sold there [than] the ship *Tamandare* has brought. We shall take care, that [in future] a greater number of negroes be taken there...”<sup>34</sup>

After the Portuguese recaptured Pernambuco in 1654, New Amsterdam became a more significant participant in the trade in enslaved people. It benefited from connections with Curaçao, which now served as the center of the Dutch trade. Furthermore, the colonists in New Netherland received permission to sail to the coast of Africa, “to

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<sup>30</sup> The decision was recorded in the minutes of the Zeeland Chamber of the West India Company Algemeen Rijksarchief, The Hague, Netherlands, Oude West Indische Companie (hereafter abbreviated OWIC), 22, fol. 369, Meeting of 26 July 1636; see also fol. 763, Meeting of 2 November 1637.

<sup>31</sup> OWIC 8, fol. 252, Jan Maurits an Nassau to XIX, 22 October 1639.

<sup>32</sup> The Dutch had captured Bahia for a short time in 1624-25 and took Pernambuco from the Portuguese in 1629. It did not attempt serious occupation until 1644.

<sup>33</sup> *DRCHNY*, 1:154.

<sup>34</sup> *Correspondence, 1647-1653*, New Netherland Documents Series, translated and edited by

procure there as many negroes as they might be willing to employ.”<sup>35</sup> In this manner, Jan Sweerts and Dirck Pietersen Wittepaert requested and received authorization to sail their ship, the *Wittepaert*, to Africa and return with human cargo.<sup>36</sup> The following year, the *Wittepaert* returned to New Amsterdam by way of Curaçao with a cargo too large to be readily absorbed by the settlement. Their re-export to other markets, where labor-starved planters eagerly snapped them up, led the Council of New Netherland to impose a tax equal to 10 percent of the value of re-exported laborers.<sup>37</sup>

Initially, trade to Africa was restricted to Angola, as in 1650 the New Netherland colony was specifically precluded from participating in the trade of “Guinea,” a generic term for the West African region.<sup>38</sup> A standard contract developed at the time authorizing trade directly with Africa stipulated that the license “does not permit [the captain] to trade on the Gold Coast, and that he shall not come any further west than Ardre or at the most Popo; under penalty of forfeiting the aforesaid ship and its cargo.”<sup>39</sup> Not until near the end of the period of Dutch control of New Netherland did the colony’s directors propose that it be allowed to trade on the Gold Coast and westward to Allada and Popo. Hence, West Central Africans would comprise the group most involved in shaping the character of the African presence in New Amsterdam.

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Charles Gehring (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 11: 5.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., *Council Minutes*, 1638-1649, 4: 314.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., *Correspondence*, 1654-1658, 12:47.

<sup>37</sup> *Laws and Ordinances of New Netherland*, 191.

<sup>38</sup> *DRCHNY*, 1:364.

<sup>39</sup> *Correspondence*, 1647-1653, 11:134-35.



### **3.0    *West Central Africa and the Origins of New Amsterdam's Black Population***

#### **3.1    *Introduction***

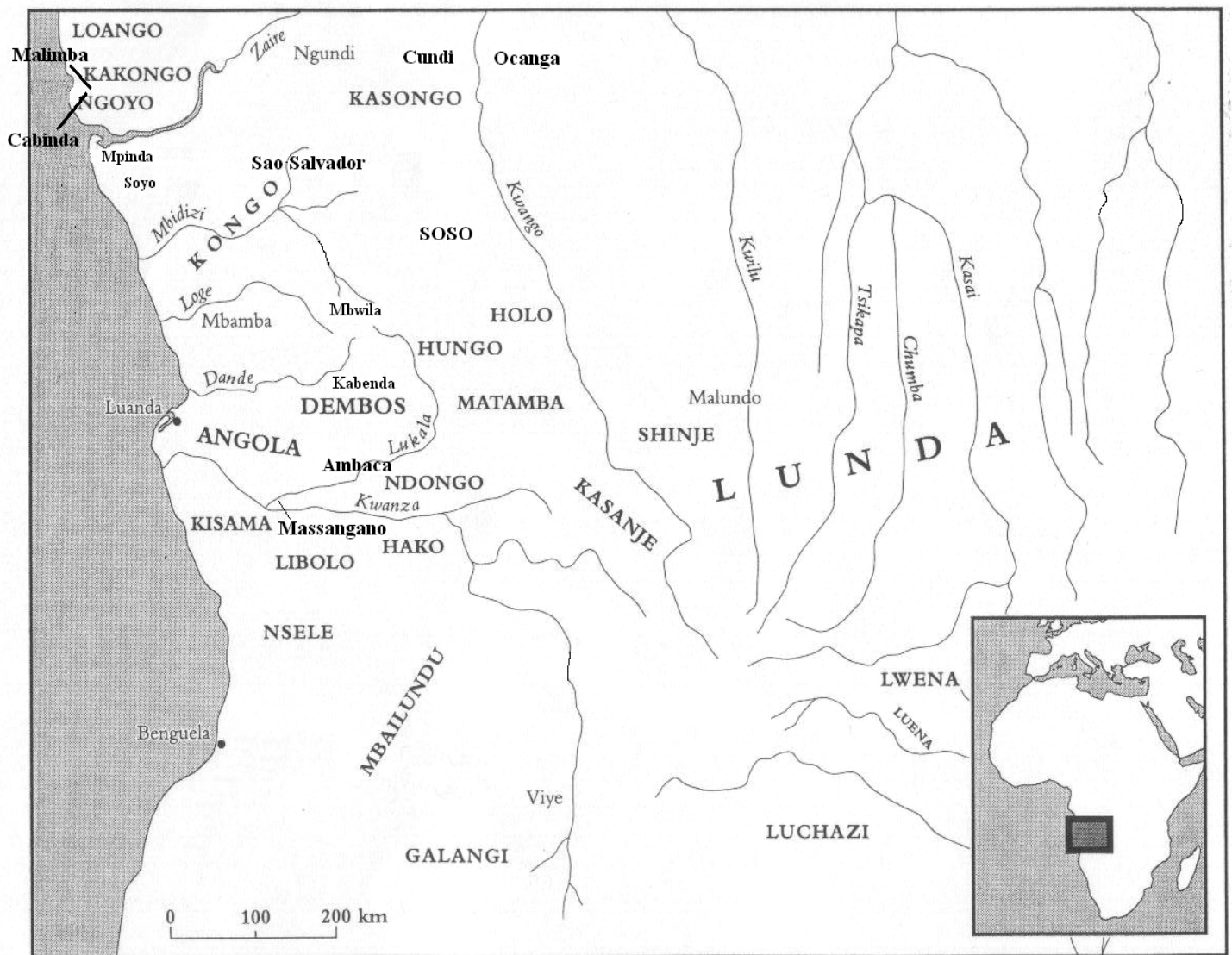
The principal area that provided enslaved Africans to New Amsterdam stretched over 720 miles along the Atlantic from the port of Mpinda in the north, Luanda in the center and Benguela in the south, and inland for approximately 240 miles. The area includes a wide range of ecosystems, from rainforests in the north (where annual rainfall hovers between 63 to 79 inches a year and temperatures average 77 and 81 degrees) to savanna plateau (with temperate climate where temperatures can fall as low as 64 degrees). The region also encompasses some of Africa's major rivers, including the Zaire (navigable for over 1,000 miles), the Kasai (600 miles), the Kwanza (576 miles), and the Cunene (567 miles). It is in this region that the modern-day provinces developed: Zaire, Uige, Bengo, Cabinda, and parts of Kwanza Sul and Kwanza North in Angola, and the coastal regions of the Republic of Congo and Democratic Republic of Congo.<sup>40</sup>

#### **3.2    *Political Structure***

During the seventeenth century, this West Central Africa region encompassed varying political structures, ranging from the Kingdom of Kongo with its capital at São Salvador some 200 miles from Mpinda to small semi-autonomous polities to the southeast of Kongo and bordering the Mbundu Kingdom of Ndongo (see Map 3.1). By

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<sup>40</sup> See Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); and Ingle Tvedten, *Angola: Struggle for Peace and Reconstruction* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 3-7.



**Map 3.1: West Central Africa, Kongo-Angola Region** (adapted from a map in John Thornton, *Warfare in Atlantic Africa*, London, 1999).

the early 1600s when enslaved Central Africans made up the majority of Africans exported to New York and the rest of the Americas, the two major states in the region—Kongo and Ndongo—exhibited distinct signs of Portuguese influence that had been evolving since 1483. Strengthened by military alliances with the Portuguese, Kongo had become a more centralized and larger state. Its growth had prompted its ruler, Alvaro IV, to declare himself in 1631 “king of the most ancient kingdom of Kongo, Angola, Matamba, Ocanga, Cunde, Sonso, and lord of all the Ambundu”.<sup>41</sup> While an exaggeration, Kongo kings did have control over lands beginning to the north of the Zaire River up to the Dande. In addition, Kongo exercised authority over Luanda Island, a region that produced the valuable *nzimbu* shells that were used throughout the kingdom as the major currency.<sup>42</sup>

To the north of Kongo lay several small states—Kakongo and Ngoyo at the coast, and Vungu some distance in the interior. Loango, the largest coastal state north of the Zaire River, was approximately the size of Ndongo in the seventeenth century. Its capital city, Buali, lay where the modern state of Disoso now stands.

The most important of the conquest states in Central Africa were the Portuguese Reino de Angola (established in 1575 in the region between the Bengo and the Kwango) and Reino de Benguela (established in the early 1600s and located to the south of Luanda). Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Portuguese in Angola incorporated areas formerly under the control of Ndongo and Kongo, while from the

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<sup>41</sup> Carta de D. Alvaro IV, Rei do Congo ao Geral da Companhia de Jesus, in *Monumenta Missionaria Africana*, ed. António Brásio, 15 vols. (Lisbon, 1952-58), 3:199-200.

<sup>42</sup> For one of the most comprehensive works on the kingdom, see Graziano Saccaro, *Kongo e Angola*, 3 vols. (Venice: Curia Provinciale de Cappuccini, 1982-83). See also John Thornton, *The Kingdom of Kongo* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

coastal settlement of Benguela they made inroads into the several Imbangala and Ovimbundu polities.

### 3.3 *The Acquisition of Central African Captives in the Seventeenth Century*

During the first decades of the seventeenth century commercial transactions and warfare comprised the main methods of acquiring enslaved people for export. The latter included Portuguese wars of conquest and slave-raiding in areas whose local rulers owed allegiance to either Kongo or Ndongo; civil wars in the Kingdom of the Kongo; and general banditry caused by Imbangala mercenary bands. For example, during the period from 1615-1670, a great many Mbundu were captured in a cycle of wars between the Portuguese, who had taken control of parts of the kingdom of Ndongo and the still independent provinces. These wars were a continuation of those the Portuguese undertook beginning in 1575 that were intended to carve out an area of settlement from the eastern and southern regions of the Ndongo kingdom. The Portuguese also engaged in these wars specifically to fulfill the *asiento* contract. In addition, they used captives to supply their colony of Brazil.

Initially, the Portuguese acquired enslaved laborers by recruiting African allies and mercenaries and by forcing trading alliances on conquered representatives of Ndongo and Kongo. The Portuguese quest for territory and captives began in earnest in the latter part of the 1500s and continued until 1800. Around 1600, they made alliances with the Imbangalas (militaristic bands who originated south of the Kwanza River), whose systematic raiding had virtually depopulated whole provinces by the end of the sixteenth

century. In fact, Portuguese merchants received some of their first Central African captives from the Imbangalas.

Portuguese military activities expanded as the seventeenth century advanced. By the 1630s Portuguese armies fighting against the Ndongo Kingdom, Kongo, and areas subordinate to these kingdoms included the *guerra preta* (African soldiers gathered as tribute from Mbundu local representatives who had been forced to become Portuguese allies), Imbangala mercenaries, and a variety of African groups who joined the Portuguese forces out of self-interest. In addition, Portuguese settlers who were required to join in official campaigns supplied their own force of enslaved African soldiers, whose numbers sometimes ranged in the thousands.<sup>43</sup> At times, Jesuits and other missionary groups who kept as many as 10,000 enslaved laborers on the plantations they managed along the Bengo River also supplied enslaved soldiers to fight in Portuguese campaigns.<sup>44</sup> In this complex political and military environment the Portuguese sacked and destroyed the capital of Ndongo and brought large sections of coastal Ndongo (such as the regions between the Bengo and Dande Rivers) and strategic regions along Ndongo (such as Embaca) under Portuguese control. These Portuguese/Imbangala armies conducted widespread punitive raids throughout Ndongo territory up to the 1650s.<sup>45</sup>

The raids proved advantageous to the slave trading governors who were in charge of the colony. For example, Mendes de Vasconcelhos (1617-21) oversaw the export of

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<sup>43</sup> For a military history of the Portuguese campaigns in Angola during the seventeenth century see António Cardonega, *História Geral das Guerras Angolana*, 3 vols. (Lisbon: Agência-Geral do Ultramar, 1972).

<sup>44</sup> For discussion of the Jesuit plantations along the Bengo River see Luis Mendes de Sousa Chichorro to Afonso VI, 22 November 1658, in *Monumenta Missionaria*, 12: 179-80.

<sup>45</sup> For the Imbangala/Portuguese alliance see John Thornton, "The African Experience of the '20 and odd Negroes' Arriving in Virginia in 1619," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d series, 55 (July 1998), 421-434.

some 50,000 captives through Luanda, all enslaved as a result of the campaigns he undertook with the Imbangala against the kingdom of Ndongo.<sup>46</sup> In fact, when the Dutch West India Company seized Luanda from the Portuguese and gained control of the trade, the Company estimated that it would be able to export 15,000 captives per year, although during the first year, they had only exported 1,500, and the number never reached what they had originally envisioned.<sup>47</sup> These Africans all went to Brazil. Exports from this region of Angola increased after the Portuguese regained control from the Dutch, for by the mid-1650s, nearly 10,500 enslaved Africans were leaving Portuguese Angola, prompting the governor, Sousa Chicorro, to boast that this was “something which had never happened in this kingdom.”<sup>48</sup>

The Portuguese also obtained Mbundu captives for export through the wars of resistance that Queen Njinga (1583-1663), the ruler of Ndongo, led against them and their Mbundu and Imbangala allies. Between 1624 and 1656 Queen Njinga, allied with her own Imbangala bands, local Mbundu allies, and the Dutch for a time, fought against Portuguese territorial expansion into Ndongo. Although in the early 1630s she was forced to take refuge in Matamba (the lands bordering Ndongo), Njinga continued her wars against the Portuguese and their Mbundu allies. These Portuguese/Njinga wars produced numerous

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<sup>46</sup> Beatrix Heintze, *Studien zur Geschichte Angolas im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert Ein Lesebuch* (Köln: Koppe, 1996), 120-121.

<sup>47</sup> This data is gathered from various sources, including letters of the officials of the West India Company, especially OWIC 68 and 57, and from the revised version of *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM*, edited by David Eltis, Stephen D. Behrendt, David Richardson, and Herbert Klein (Cambridge, 1999).

<sup>48</sup> Luis Mendes de Sousa Chichorro to King Alfonso VI, 3 February 1656, in Maria Luísa Esteves, “Para o estudo das relações comerciais de Angola com as Índias de Castela e Génova no período da Restauração,” *Stvdia* 51 (1992), 41.

refugees and captives for export. Although most of them were of Mbundu ethnic origin,<sup>49</sup> others came from eastern Kongo and from the lands lying east of Matamba.

During the seventeenth century (and throughout the eighteenth as well), captives also came from the several civil wars that the Kingdom of Kongo experienced. For example, between 1615 and the 1640s, seven different kings ruled in the Kongo, and from the 1660s and well into the 1770s, not a year passed without a provincial ruler rising up against central authority. At times, these intrigues did not originate in Kongo but in Portuguese Angola, where governors eagerly exploited Kongo's political divisions. In 1622, for example, a combined Portuguese force of 30,000 Mbundu *guerra preta*, Imbangala, and Portuguese soldiers invaded the Kongo province of Mbamba, killing the Duke, 90 lesser nobles, and thousands of Kongolese soldiers. The Kongolese captives were exported through Luanda and sent to the Americas.<sup>50</sup> Portuguese campaigns against Kongo in 1665 at the Battle at Mbwila also led to the death of António I and the capture of thousands of Kongolese whom the victorious Portuguese exported as enslaved laborers to the Americas.<sup>51</sup>

Enslaved people leaving Central Africa in the seventeenth century also came through purchase. During the early part of the century, African agents (*pumbeiros*) who worked on behalf of Portuguese merchants living in Luanda accompanied some of the armies and purchased captives after the fighting ended. In addition, the *pumbeiros*

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<sup>49</sup> For the Mbundu wars see David Birmingham, *Trade and Conflict in Angola: The Mbundu and their Neighbors under the Influence of the Portuguese, 1483-1790* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966).

<sup>50</sup> For the details of this campaign see Apostolic Collector to Cardinal Pavilicino, in *Monumenta Missionaria* 15: 517.

<sup>51</sup> For the Battle of Mbwila see Thornton, *Kingdom of Kongo*, 74-76. See also Thornton, *Warfare in Atlantic Africa* (London, UCL Press, 1999), xi, 121-22.

bought enslaved people at the *ferias* or slave markets that were established in Ndongo and Kongo and at their eastern frontiers. During times of peace, in the areas of Kongo and Ndongo that were nearest the coast, African agents traveled to these markets with imported items to purchase captives who might themselves have been victims of wars in the interior regions. Although these captives might have spoken Mbundu or Kongo, they were culturally different from those who were exported as a result of the Portuguese/Ndongo wars of the early seventeenth century or those exported as a result of the Kongo civil wars.

Whether victims of Portuguese efforts to fulfill the *asiento* contract with Spain and to provision its own colony of Brazil or the byproduct of internecine wars, this first generation of New York Africans left behind societies that had been central to their lives. As they unwillingly boarded ships for destinations unknown to them, they faced an uncertain future without the support of family and other cherished social institutions. Survival in this new environment would require cooperation with like-situated individuals and adaptation to (if not acceptance of) a new order that denied them the rights that free people took for granted.



## 4.0 *Slavery and Freedom in New Amsterdam*

### 4.1 *Introduction*

Given their exposure to Portuguese customs and their acquaintance with the larger Atlantic world,<sup>52</sup> many of the new arrivals from West Central Africa may have found the daily routines in the tiny settlement at New Amsterdam somewhat familiar. Yet, transport to and enslavement in America had a profound impact on the population, both physically and culturally. As they performed their labor, African peoples responded to their situation by forming institutions that reflected the influences of both an African heritage as well as American realities. Small numbers<sup>53</sup> doubtless hindered the development of a separate cultural identity, but by the end of the Dutch period, New Amsterdam's West Central Africans had established a community that served as a foundation for the varied African groups that would follow.

### 4.2 *The Meaning of Slavery during the Dutch Period*

Slavery in New Amsterdam developed without clearly defined laws. The African men and women who labored for the Company and for private individuals did so absent many of the proscriptions that slave codes in later years imposed. Hence, enslaved blacks enjoyed certain rights that included ownership of personal and real property as well as the

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<sup>52</sup> Ira Berlin has placed people of similar background in the category of "Atlantic creoles." For a discussion of their influence in the Americas, see Berlin, "From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African-American Society in Mainland North America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d series, vol. 3, no. 2 (April 1996), 251-88; and Berlin's *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>53</sup> Robert Swan has estimated that by the end of the first decade of importation, approximately 50 Africans inhabited New Amsterdam. In the next two decades, the numbers increased slowly, reaching an average annual growth rate of only 13 Africans per year. Yet, compared to the overall adult population in the settlement, slaveholding (if not ownership) was widespread and slavery was firmly rooted in the economy and the society. See Swan's "Slaves and Slaveholding," 63 and 67.

opportunity to have grievances redressed in the courts and through petition. They offered testimony both in matters regarding other enslaved people as well as those concerning free men, black and white. Enslaved Africans bore arms when the need to protect the settlement arose, could marry legally, and suffered no prohibitions against the acquisition of literacy.<sup>54</sup>

Edgar McManus has pointed to these privileges as evidence of the mildness of slavery in New York, an indication of a “spirit of mutual accommodation between masters and slaves.”<sup>55</sup> Extant records suggest a more complex picture. If Africans had equal standing in the courts, that fact did not preclude their being seen as distinct enough to warrant a racial designation in the records. White men and women were not identified in this manner. Moreover, black men and women were forced to endure the degradation of being offered for sale at public auction (as Figure 4.1 illustrates) and hired out to New Amsterdam’s residents.<sup>56</sup> The decision of the Company in 1644 to accept the petition of the first group of Africans who had arrived in the settlement with half rather than complete freedom further attests to the inferior standing of Africans in the society. There can be no mistaking the meaning of a 1638 ordinance which sought to control the behavior of New Amsterdam’s free residents by ordering that “each and every one must refrain from Fighting, Adulterous intercourse with Heathens, Blacks, or other

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<sup>54</sup> Edgar J. McManus, *A History of Negro Slavery in New York* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1966), 16-18. In 1635, five African men petitioned the West India Company for wages owed to them. Although extant records fail to indicate the legal status of these men, there is no evidence to suggest that their petition was seen by the Company as unusual. See Stokes, *Iconography*, 4:82.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. McManus sees the willingness on the part of the Dutch to arm Africans during the Indian Wars of 1641-44 and a relative leniency in punishment for crimes and misbehavior as additional indicators of a different kind of slavery from that which developed under the British in later years.

<sup>56</sup> See Myndert Lourisen, pltf. v/s Nicolaes Boot, def’t,” in *The Records of New Amsterdam from 1653-1674*, Minutes of the Court of Burgomasters and Schepens, ed. Berthold Fernow, 7 vols. (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1897), 4:354 .



**Figure 4.1:** Auction of an Enslaved Man during the Dutch Period (*Harper's Monthly Magazine*, 1895).

Persons, Mutiny, Theft, False Swearing, Calumny and other Immoralities.”<sup>57</sup> Finally, an ordinance of 1642, intended to deter fighting, stipulated that anyone convicted of drawing a knife would be fined 50 florins and, upon defaulting on this, be required “to work three months with the Negroes in chains.”<sup>58</sup>

Neither did a lack of codification of slavery preclude punishment or sale for some misdeed or for otherwise giving dissatisfaction. In this regard, Peter Stuyvesant and the councilors of New Netherlands ordered that a black woman and man—“Negress” Palasse and an unidentified African—be traded “for the maximum profit of the Company” for theft and laziness, respectively.<sup>59</sup> Lysbeth Anthonissen, “a negro wench” belonging to tavern owner and onetime orphan master Martin Creiger, ran afoul of New Amsterdam authorities with similar results. On February 5, 1664, authorities charged her with burning down her owner’s tavern at No. 3 Broadway. Four days later, following confession to the crime and after having received a death sentence, she was taken to the place of public execution. A last minute pardon saved her from the flames of the stake, but her owner, deciding to rid himself of his troublesome property, offered her for sale at public auction.<sup>60</sup>

One of the most serious crimes with which an enslaved person could be charged was murder, but the value of laborers sometimes intervened to temper the punishment. When an enslaved African was murdered by his comrades in 1641, the eight men

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<sup>57</sup> *Laws and Ordinances of New Netherland*, 12.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 33. See also A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., “*In the Matter of Color: Race and the American Legal Process—The Colonial Period*” (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 110.

<sup>59</sup> *Council Minutes, 1655-1656*, New Netherland Documents Series (1995), 6:267.

<sup>60</sup> Council Minutes, [vol. 10, pt. 3], *Calendar of Dutch Historical Manuscripts in the Office of the Secretary of State, Albany, New York, 1630-1664*, ed. Edmund B. O’Callaghan, 258-259.

implicated all confessed to having participated in the crime. Reluctant to lose the labor of all eight men, the authorities required that one of them be chosen by lot to hang.

Misfortune fell on Manuel Gerrit de Reus but when the attempt was made to execute him, the rope broke. The crowd in attendance called for mercy, which led the authorities to pardon the man “subject to future good behavior and willing service.”<sup>61</sup>

#### 4.3 *The Employment of Enslaved Labor in New Amsterdam*

The 1652 incident involving the Dutch privateer *De Raaf* further illustrates the significance of black labor to New Amsterdam. The vessel brought forty-four captives to the town after having acquired them from the captured Spanish ship *St. Anthoni*. Four years later, Jan Gaillardo,<sup>62</sup> presented a claim to Dutch authorities for the return of his property. All but seven of the forty-four could be accounted for, even though many of them had changed ownership since their initial sale. A few of the twenty-two men, ten women, and five children were in the Dutch West India Company’s possession, but the rest were privately held by a diverse group of men and women who carried on business in the town. The value placed on such workers in labor-starved New Amsterdam practically guaranteed that Gaillardo’s claims to ownership would go unrecognized.<sup>63</sup>

The Africans who were brought to New Amsterdam had been accustomed to working in a variety of capacities: clearing land in the forests, building and repairing

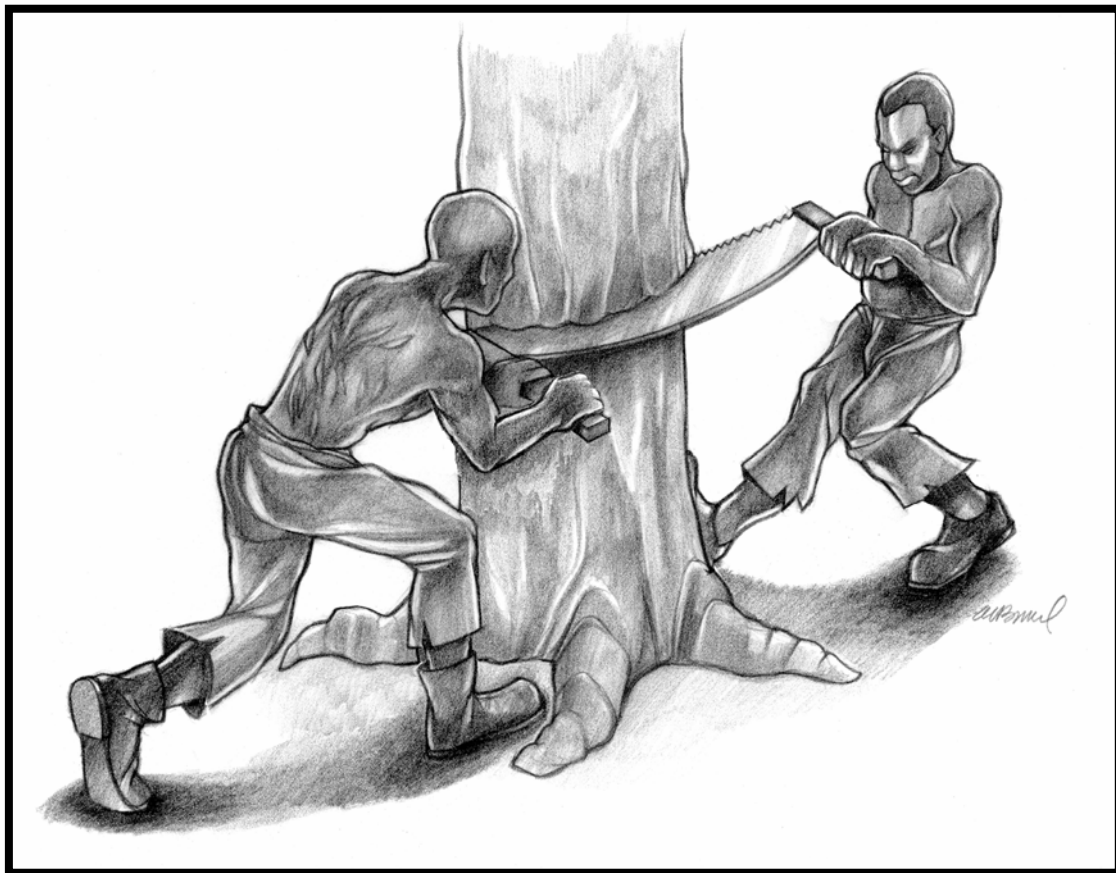
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<sup>61</sup> Council Minutes [4:83-85], January 1641, *Calendar of Dutch Historical Manuscripts*, 74. These men received half-free status two years later (see discussion in Section 4.9 below).

<sup>62</sup> Gaillardo’s name is referred to variously in historical records as Joan Gaillardo Ferrara and Juan Gaillardo.

<sup>63</sup> *DRCHNY*, 2:23-47.

houses, and providing portage for the transport of salt and iron (ubiquitous at many of the regional markets) or other commodities in production centers. Some of them may have also engaged in a variety of artisan or craft work, including cloth weaving. In New Amsterdam, African men engaged in similarly varied occupations. According to their overseer Jacob Stoffelsen, they participated “in building Fort Amsterdam, which was completed in 1635...in cutting building timber and firewood for the Large House as well as the guardhouse, splitting palisades, clearing land, burning lime and helping to bring in



**Figure 4.2: African men were utilized in a variety of labor practices, including felling trees (Illustration by Michael Colbert, 2004).**

the company's grain in harvest time, together with many other labors."<sup>64</sup> The Africans also provided military service, as Native American attacks posed a constant threat to the settlement. During the period of Dutch rule, Africans were used to construct a wagon road between New Amsterdam and the Haarlem community and labored to erect defenses in preparation for the British invasion of the colony in 1664.<sup>65</sup> The multi-faceted use of these laborers is evidenced in director Peter Stuyvesant's 1660 correspondence with the vice-director of the West India Company at Curaçao:

The negroes, whom the Lords-Directors ordered to send hither, must be clever and strong men so that they can immediately be put to work here at the Fort or at other places, also if they are fit for it, in the war against the wild barbarians either to pursue them, when they run away or else to carry the soldiers' baggage...An important service would be done to the Company, to us and to the country, if among the expected negroes some experienced men, who have been some time in Curaçao, were sent to us.<sup>66</sup>

Africans were expected, as well, to perform the most distasteful tasks associated with town living. In 1664, the presence of dead hogs littering the street prompted a town official to inquire about their disposal. Hardly surprising, the city court instructed him to "send the City's Negroes to collect and bury the same."<sup>67</sup>

Early directives issued by the Council of New Netherland also alluded to the desire to have Africans supply the labor for cultivation of the soil, as the production of grains and other foodstuffs during the seventeenth century proved essential to the

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<sup>64</sup> "Deposition Concerning the Erection of Fort Amsterdam and Other Work Done by the Company's Negroes," *DRCHNY*, 14:18.

<sup>65</sup> Joyce Goodfriend, "Burghers and Blacks: The Evolution of a Slave Society at New Amsterdam," in *New York History*, vol. 4 (April 1978), 130-31.

<sup>66</sup> *DRCHNY*, 13:142-43.

<sup>67</sup> *The Records of New Amsterdam*, 5:45.

colony's survival.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, the Company routinely leased to private individuals some of its enslaved laborers for this purpose. At times, it included the use of enslaved workers with rental of bowery lands. In 1638, for instance, West India Company director Wouten Van Twiller leased one of these farms, along with a half dozen men, for the purpose of growing tobacco.

The arduous labor that characterized early seventeenth-century agriculture ensured the use of enslaved people. Before crops could be planted, the land had to be cleared of trees and underbrush. This was accomplished by the use of brute strength and teamwork or by borrowing the methods of the indigenous population, which involved felling the trees by girdling them. Farmers prepared the resulting fields for planting by using farm tools woefully inadequate for the task. Most made use of the hoe; plows remained scarce for much of the century. Farming implements generally were made of wood, a material that proved to be less durable than New Amsterdam's soil demanded.<sup>69</sup> Inadequate tools slowed the rate of cultivation and doubtless increased the bio-mechanical stress suffered by laborers engaged in repetitive, arduous work.

Such strenuous labor likely was performed by all-male gangs,<sup>70</sup> but as the principal agricultural laborers in West Central Africa (to the extent that they planted and tended the crops), enslaved women would have been intimately familiar with farming routines. Women and girls who lived in the Kongo region hoed the fields as adolescents and young wives (See figure 4.3). They planted and harvested a variety of crops,

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<sup>68</sup> Robert Swan, "Slaves and Slaveholding in Dutch New York," 35.

<sup>69</sup> David Hawke, *Everyday Life in Early America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 36.

<sup>70</sup> Swan suggests that women may not have been exempted from agricultural labor. See Swan, "Slaves and Slaveholding," 52.



including corn and vegetables from which they made *nfundi* (boiled corn meal from dried corn that was the staple of the Kongolese diet) and *wandu* (a vegetable dish that was most likely made from pigeon peas). The earliest references to women's work in New Amsterdam, however, suggest that they labored as domestics, performing all manner of household chores and taking care of the owner's children. Even in the earliest years of their presence in the town, however, African women pursued interests that conflicted with the desires of those who owned them. In 1628, Domine Jonas Michaelius, New Amsterdam's first minister of the Dutch Reformed Church and recently widowed, lamented the dearth of good female servants to take care of his household and two young daughters. The Angola women, he alleged, were "thievish, lazy, and useless trash."<sup>71</sup>

Enslaved Africans would have worked in the various industries set up by the Dutch in New Amsterdam as well. For instance, Michaelius had reported on brick-making in the settlement, albeit of "very poor" quality.<sup>72</sup> The residents had also constructed a gristmill, windmill, and sawmill during the first decade of settlement.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Letter of Domine Jonas Michaelius to Domine Adrianus Smoutius, August 11, 1628, in *Collections*, New York Historical Society (1880), 6: 383.

<sup>72</sup> Michaelius, 385.

<sup>73</sup> J.H. Innes. *New Amsterdam and Its People: Studies, Social and Topographical of the Town under Dutch and Early English Rule*. (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1902). See also J. Franklin Jameson, *Narratives of New Netherland, 1609-1664*. (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1909), 129.



**Figure 4.3: Kongo Woman at Agricultural Labor (Cavazzi, *Istorica Descrizione*).**

A 1628 "Freedoms and Exemptions" measure attempted to exclude Africans from the trades. But by the late 1650s, Company directors, pressed to solve the problem of securing skilled workers, suggested that the Africans might be taught certain skills useful to the colony's success, including "carpentering, brick-laying, blacksmithing...[as] this race...has sufficient fitness for it."<sup>74</sup> Stuyvesant and the council apparently thought otherwise. They reported back that there were no Africans at New Amsterdam "fit to learn a trade."<sup>75</sup> Laws and individual assessments to the contrary, however, Africans were used in whatever ways the colonists felt they could be most useful. By the time the Dutch lost control of the colony, enslaved Africans were held by a variety of persons with diverse occupational skills. It is likely that some of these slaveholders kept their laborers busy at more than unskilled work.

#### 4.4 *Social and Cultural Foundations of New Amsterdam's African Population*

As African labor proved increasingly important to the colony, the number of enslaved people increased. During the period from 1644 to 1664, the population of persons of African descent residing in New Amsterdam more than tripled, growing from 120 to 375. Approximately 70 percent of them possessed the surname "Angola," suggesting ethnic ties generally to the West Central Africa region.<sup>76</sup>

West Central Africans came from societies with varied and complex social structures. At the top of the social hierarchy stood those of noble birth (the kings and

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<sup>74</sup> *DRCHNY*, 14:387.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 14:399.

<sup>76</sup> Swan, "The Other Fort Amsterdam: New Light on Aspects of Slavery in New Netherland." *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 22 (1998), 27-28.

ruling groups). These groups generally lived in the capital cities, some of which resembled contemporary cities in Portugal in function and size. A mid-sixteenth century observer commenting on one of these capitals suggested that

they have a lot of order for people of Guinea...the principal city is as big as Évora [in Portugal] or a little less, and they have others of good size...circled after their manner, by palisades of wood strung together with cords and the wattle and daub houses [argamassa] covered with very nice and clean straw mats.<sup>77</sup>

In describing the Kongo capital at São Salvador, in the mid-1660s, Olifert Dapper noted that it contained approximately 40,000 people. The king's palace was "surrounded with walls, in such manner that between it and the town remained a great plain in the middle whereof they have erected a beautiful church." Next to the king's palace were "noble men's houses and others fill up the top of the mountain: for every grandee settles his dwelling as near the court as he may be permitted, and with his retinue takes up as much ground as an ordinary town may be built on." The houses of the Africans, while constructed of thatched materials (in contrast to the clay homes erected by the Portuguese, who settled in a separate part of the city), "the common houses stand in good order, and appear very uniform; most of them large, well contrived and fenced."<sup>78</sup>

The non-noble freeborn and dependent groups comprised the bulk of the population in Central Africa and, hence, provided the majority of captives for the Americas. In Kongo, this group was divided into two social classes: the *mavata* (free villagers) and the *avika* (slaves), while in Ndongo they comprised three groups: the *ana*

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<sup>77</sup> Untitled, no author, Biblioteca Nacional de Lisboa, MS 8123. Also published in Ruela Pombo, *Angola-Menina, 1560-1565* (Lisboa: Diogo Cão, 1944), 9-10.

<sup>78</sup> John Ogilby, *Africa, Being an Accurate Description of the Regions of Egypt...* (London, 1670), 525. For the original see, Olifert Dapper, *Naukerige Beschrijvinge der Afrikaenshe gewesten van Egyptien, Barbaryen, Libien...Guinea, Ethiopien, Abyssinie...* (Amsterdam, 1668).

*murinda* (free villagers), *ijiko* (state owned-slaves) and *abika* (privately-owned slaves).<sup>79</sup>

Although captives coming from the polities farther east of the Kwango River originated from societies where similar divisions existed, before the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, written accounts of their social divisions are almost non-existent. In the Umbundu area the several kingdoms that had emerged by the 1700s also contained complex social divisions that separated people into ruling lineages, free persons and the enslaved.

The majority of enslaved Central Africans came from regions where agriculture was the major economic activity; hence, most cultural practices, belief systems, and rituals were connected to seasonal patterns. Seventeenth-century observers noted that in Angola where the Mbundu people lived, the year began in September at the start of the rains rather than in January.<sup>80</sup> The agricultural season thus went from October to January when the people planted vegetables, maize, millet and other crops. In some regions the people also planted American and European crops, including tobacco, radishes, and onions that some Kongolese had naturalized. The lives of Central Africans who lived in capital towns such as São Salvador and those who lived in the Portuguese city of Luanda were governed by the rhythms of the commercial and administrative activities that typified life in those areas.

Central Africans had a range of social networks as well. The army was the largest such organizer in Kongo. Thus Kongo men who participated in Kongo's military campaigns (and women who always accompanied the men to war) likely danced the

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<sup>79</sup> For the social groups in Kongo and Ndongo see Thornton, *Kingdom of Kongo*.

<sup>80</sup> Cavazzi, *Istorica Descrizione*, book. 1, chap. 13, 48.

*nsanga* as part of the rituals associated with warfare. Kongolese Christians would have participated in church organizations such as the lay brotherhood (for instance, Our Lady of the Rosary) and would have been familiar with the names and significance of saints (which they connected with their own local spirits, *nkitas* or *simbis*). Indeed, they would carry both a saint's and a Kongolese name and would have participated in public rituals connected with St. James Day (celebrated on July 25 to commemorate Kongo King Afonso's victory over his brother and the establishment of Christianity in the kingdom). Furthermore, Kongolese would have been familiar with the public performances and rituals that were associated with the feast of All Souls and All Souls Eve. These holy Catholic festivals were associated with the ancestors, and the people kept all-night vigil at their ancestors' graves, where they placed candles and said the rosary.<sup>81</sup>

Kongo society also retained other institutions that were unique to it. The *Kimpasi*, for instance, were secret associations formed locally and run by initiates. The enclosures that the initiates established could contain a Christian cross or *nkisis* (statues in human form that had the power to "see" wrongdoers, witches, jealousy, greed, and cruelty). *Kimpasi* altars also contained claws, horns, nails and other parts of animals that the Kongolese believed were invested with power.<sup>82</sup>

We may never know the extent to which these beliefs and practices transferred to and were reshaped in the New Amsterdam environment. It is reasonable to assume, however, that West Central Africans (like all people) held to their traditions to the degree

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<sup>81</sup> Thornton, *Kongolese Saint Anthony* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 31-32.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 56-58; Anne Hilton, *Kingdom of Kongo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985) 26-27. The purpose of the *Kimpasi* was communal healing and the ending of conflict.

that their bondage and circumstances permitted. Removal from their homelands and enslavement in New Amsterdam would have challenged their ability to define themselves on their own cultural terms, but would not have wiped out influences long embedded in their collective consciousness.

#### 4.5 *Forging Familial and Communal Bonds*

In addition to influences stemming from their African origins, Africans in New Amsterdam experienced the impact of living among various other groups found in the already ethnically and culturally diverse society, including Dutch, French, German, Belgium, and English. Jesuit missionary Father Issac Jogues visited New Amsterdam in 1643 and found in the settlement “men of eighteen different languages” and “besides the Calvinists there are in the colony Catholics, English, Puritans, Lutherans, [and] Anabaptists...”<sup>83</sup>

In this environment, the Africans attempted to forge a common identity based on shared experiences and concerns. The first generations married, reared children, and sought to establish a community that could provide material and emotional support to its members. The social unit which served as the primary foundation for this cohesion was the family. Joyce Goodfriend has shown that through naming practices, Africans in New Amsterdam reinforced ties between their children and family members, past and present. Baptized children often carried the names of older men and women in the community and certain European given names—Jan, Domingo, Pieter, Francisco, for instance—were

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<sup>83</sup> Quoted in Stokes, *Iconography*, 4:97.

used repeatedly.<sup>84</sup> New Amsterdam Africans enjoyed extended family networks and formed bonds with non-kin that expanded the pool of “relatives” even more. And although they answered to European given names (acquired either before arrival in New Amsterdam or shortly thereafter), they often maintained African surnames, even in freedom.<sup>85</sup>

Economic factors, demographic realities, and the caprice of owners—hiring out, sales, slaveholding patterns, forced separations as a consequence of bequests—challenged the ability of enslaved people to enjoy familial connections.<sup>86</sup> Yet, a degree of stability developed in the community of African peoples. They stood as witnesses at each other’s marriages and as godparents when children born to such unions were baptized.<sup>87</sup> In addition, the community’s small size encouraged the re-absorption of orphans, widows, and widowers through marriage and adoption.<sup>88</sup> Hence, when Catalina Van Angola died, her widower, Anthony Van Angola, married Lucie, the widow of Laurens d'Angola. Their marriage on May 5, 1641 held the distinction of being the first among African peoples to be recorded in New Amsterdam’s Dutch Reformed Church.<sup>89</sup> When the Angolas' son, Anthony, was christened in August 1643, Dorothy Angola, widow of Paulo D'Angola, stood as godmother. Dorothy and her second husband, Emanuel

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<sup>84</sup> Joyce Goodfriend, “Black Families in New Netherland,” *Journal of the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society*, vol. 5, nos. 3 and 4 (1984), 102-103.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-101.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 100. Goodfriend estimates that more than 100 children were born to African parents during the Dutch period.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.* Goodfriend indicates that between 1639 and 1664, the marriages of 26 couples were recorded in the Dutch Reformed Church.



Peterson, adopted the child when he became orphaned while still an infant. In 1661, their petition was instrumental in the young man's receiving a certificate of freedom on his eighteenth birthday.<sup>90</sup>

#### 4.6 *Structuring a New Cosmology*

A shared sacred belief system further connected New Amsterdam's black population. The religious experiences of seventeenth-century Central Africans varied from traditional African practices to those shaped by European influences. As we have seen, since the late fifteenth century, many had been exposed to Portuguese religious practices and, as a consequence, had embraced Catholicism. In places such as São Salvador "divers Jesuits, Mulattos and Black priests" instructed the locals and performed sacred duties.<sup>91</sup> By the 1640s, the city supported nearly a dozen churches as well as schools "where youths are brought up and taught the Latin and Portuguese tongues." Although none of the other cities had such a Europeanized appearance as São Salvador, in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, significant numbers of Central Africans lived in communities where Christianity, European languages, dress, foodways, and other cultural practices interacted in various ways to create what might be called an Atlantic Creole culture.

By the late seventeenth century Christianity had become the main indicator of social status in Kongo. Kongo rulers were in constant contact with the Papacy, welcomed missionaries, and ensured that the people were baptized and adopted Christian names.

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<sup>90</sup> Richard Dickenson, "Abstracts of Early Black Manhattanites," *New York Genealogical and Biographical Records*, 116:102.

<sup>91</sup> Ogilby, *Africa*, 524.

They erected churches in central places or built crosses in villages far removed from the capital where they welcomed visiting priests and brought their babies (and came themselves) for baptism and other sacraments.<sup>92</sup>

Farther south in the Ndongo and Matamba regions, the divisions between Christian and non-Christian were more pronounced, as individual rulers who had come under Portuguese authority were required to undergo baptism and to allow missionaries to baptize the population. In these areas, as in Kongo, people who were baptized carried Iberian and Christian names, dressed in a mixture of European and African clothing, and often spoke Portuguese along with Kimbundu or Kikongo. In addition, the large numbers of West Central Africans who lived in Portuguese-controlled areas such as Luanda, Massangano, Benguela, and elsewhere maintained close contact with Portuguese culture. This was especially so for servants and those enslaved in the homes and businesses, missionary colleges and government agencies in Luanda, and in the forts that the Portuguese had built in the interior.

European secular and religious authorities who traveled to Kongo and Angola during the seventeenth century noted the Catholic practices of the Kongolese and those Mbundus who had converted to Christianity. A Protestant Dutch trader, Ferdinand van Capelle, indicated that Kongo was “full of wooden crosses, before which people bowed devoutly on their knees. Every noble has his own church at his village with a wooden cross.” Rosaries were ubiquitous and people said them, but “without knowing or

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<sup>92</sup> P. Graziano Saccardo, *Congo e Angola, con la storia dell'antica missione dei Cappuccini*, 3 vols. (Venice, 1982).

understanding a word of Portuguese.”<sup>93</sup> Catholicism spread as Central African rulers opened their lands to Jesuit, Capuchin, and other missionaries from Italy, Spain, and Portugal. When Antonio da Gaeta visited Matamba in the 1650s at the invitation of Queen Njinga (who had been baptized in Luanda in 1622 and who had recently returned to the church), he was able to baptize the principal lords along with 8,000 people because “everyone follows their lords.” The baptized also included 1000 babies born since his last visit to Matamba. Gaeta noted that although he baptized them, he “doubted their knowledge of faith.”<sup>94</sup>

Indeed, by the seventeenth century the Kingdom of Kongo had developed its own patterns of worship and rituals, after more than a century and a half of being exposed to Roman Catholicism by the Portuguese. Kongo’s form of Christianity always disturbed missionaries new to the Kingdom, who in frustration, complained to authorities in Rome that the Kongoleses were not true Catholics. A report from the missionary Manuel Bautista Soares in 1619 condemned polygamy and marriages between close relatives, practices favored primarily by the Kongoleses nobility. Although the bishop considered these practices outside of the limits of consanguinity, they continued to live comfortably with such traditions.<sup>95</sup> The Kongoleses were clearly in charge of spreading their own

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<sup>93</sup> OWIC 46, Ferdinand van Capelle, “Corte beschrijvinge van de principaelste plaetsen gelegen in Angola te weten Commo, Goby, Maiomba, Loango, Cacongo, Molembœ, Zarry, Sonho, Congo, en aderen omleggende plaetsen...” March 1642, (unpaginated, 5<sup>th</sup> folio).

<sup>94</sup> Antonio da Gaeta, *La meravigliosa Conversione alla santa fede di Cristo della regina Signa e del suo regno di Matamba nell’Africa meridionale, descritta con historico stile* (Napoli, G. Passaro, 1669), 243-46.

<sup>95</sup> [Manuel Baptista Soares] “Relação dos costumes, ritos, e abusos do Bispado de Congo, que o Bispo deu a V. Magestade, e pena dos que nelle se cometem,” 7 September 1619, in *Monumenta Missionaria*, 6: 376.

version of Catholic Christianity in the kingdom, since there was seldom a sufficient number of foreign missionaries, especially in the eighteenth century.<sup>96</sup>

Even among Kongolese Christians, African religious rituals were everywhere evident. Writing in 1659, Bonaventura de Allesano, a Capuchin missionary, complained that there were men and women who met “in special places, decorated with statues of idols where they invoke the devil and where they do sexual mixing without regard to parentage.” He also noted “a similar sect of virgins, lodged secretly by notables in hidden places,” and that “magicians, enchanter and witches, real or imagined” were fooling people.<sup>97</sup> Similarly, Christian Oldendorp noted the contrast between Kongolese who came from the coastal areas and those originating from the interior of the kingdom. He observed that the latter had “a religion that combines heathen superstition and Christian ritual.”<sup>98</sup>

Among the Central Africans transported to New Amsterdam and ultimately interred in the burial ground were those who retained their own indigenous rituals. Most of them believed in a great God, whom they called Nzambi a Mpungu, and they had icons which they either kept in houses or in special places constructed in the village. The faithful consulted these icons at times of great insecurity such as war, drought, sickness,

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<sup>96</sup> Thornton, “Religious and Ceremonial Life”, in *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora*, ed. Linda Heywood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 71-90.

<sup>97</sup> Memorial of Bonaventura da Alessano, August 1649, in *Monumenta Missionaria*, 10: 395-397.

<sup>98</sup> Christian Georg Andreas Oldendorp, *Histoire der caribishchen Inseln Sanct Thomas, Sanct Crux, und Sanct jan, Kommentierte Edition des originalmanusskriptes*. 4 vols. (Dresden: Staatliches Museum, 2000-2002), 1: 445-448.

and death.<sup>99</sup> The Mondongo that Oldendorp interviewed indicated that in their country they kept small and big images that people dressed and kept in their houses and that were attended by and spoke through the priests. During possession, the priests provided information concerning wars, drought, health, fertility, and rain to supplicants who paid them for their services.<sup>100</sup>

When they arrived in New Amsterdam, these Central Africans—be they practicing Catholics of sorts or traditional African worshipers—encountered a religious faith, if not foreign, then certainly somewhat different from that to which they had been exposed. While the Angola family and others embraced the faith, some showed reluctance to accept the Calvinist theology of the Dutch Reformed Church. Michaelius complained that he had “as yet been able to discover hardly a single good point [regarding Native American spirituality], except that they do not speak so jeeringly and so scoffingly of the godlike and glorious majesty of their Creator, as the Africans dare do.”<sup>101</sup>

West Central Africans who practiced Catholicism soon discovered that their faith did not bring the benefits they expected. In 1661, a church official instructed that in baptizing Africans, Native Americans, and their children

it is necessary that you observe the good rule of the church here in this land, where no one, who is an adult, is admitted to baptism without previous confession of his faith. Accordingly the adult Negroes and Indians must also be previously instructed and make confession of their faith before Holy Baptism may be administered to them. As to their children, the Classis answers, that as long as the parents are actually

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<sup>99</sup> For a description of these practices as related to Oldendorp by enslaved central Africans see, Oldendorp, *Histoire*, 1:437-439. See also Thornton, “Religious and Ceremonial Life”, 71-91.

<sup>100</sup> Oldendorp, *Histoire*, 1:438-439.

<sup>101</sup> Michaelius, 380.

heathen, although they were baptized in the gross, (by the wholesale, by the Papists), the children may not be baptized, unless the parents pass over to Christianity and abandon heathenism.<sup>102</sup>

Despite such roadblocks, however, some of the Africans joined the Dutch Reformed Church or sought early on to have their children baptized in the faith. Church officials surmised that they did so because they believed (mistakenly) that freedom could be secured through acceptance of Christianity.<sup>103</sup>

#### 4.7 *A Place of their Own*

The sense of community that developed out of common experiences and shared cultural practices was strengthened by the existence of a defined space that New Amsterdam's Africans could claim as their own. On July 13, 1643, Governor Willem Kieft granted a ground-brief of approximately 12 acres to Domingo Antony. The land stretched "from ye Waggon way about W. and by N. to ye ffresh Water or Swamp neare to ye land of Thomas Sanders...",<sup>104</sup> property known as Smith's Hill farm. On the same day, Kieft granted a parcel of eight acres to Jochim Antony's (or Antonio) widow, Catalina (or Katalina). Her land lay "N. of ye Waggon way Stretching amongst ye said Waggon path upon a S.W. lyne till it comes to Domingo Antonioes Land."<sup>105</sup> By the end of the year, Manuel Trompeter and Marycke, the widow of Lawrence Angola and

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<sup>102</sup> *Ecclesiastical Records of the State of New York* (Albany: James B. Lyon, 1901), 508.

<sup>103</sup> Swan, "Slaves and Slaveholding," 60-61.

<sup>104</sup> Stokes, *Iconography*, 4:73.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:74.

eventually wife of Domingo Angola, were granted eighteen and six acres, respectively.<sup>106</sup>

There is indication that three other enslaved men—Emanuel Pietersen, Anthony Portugees, and Manuel Gerrit de Reus—may have had possession of plots of land at this time as well.<sup>107</sup>

As early as 1641, African laborers occupied lands that lay north of Smith's Hill farm, which formerly had been in the possession of Wouten Van Twiller, director of New Amsterdam. These lands were conveyed in 1644 or thereafter and were confirmed after the British gained possession of the colony in 1664. In this manner, more than a dozen Africans passed into the landowning class, including: Simon Congo (45 acres, date unknown), Pieter Santome (6 acres in 1644), Gratia D'angola (10 acres in 1644), Cleyne Antonio (1644, confirmed in 1667, 6 acres).<sup>108</sup> East of the Bowery Road and north of Domingo Anthony's property lay the lands of Francisco, Bastiaen, and Antony Congo. The lots were granted by Governor Willem Kieft in 1647 and lay along the public wagon road. Congo and Bastiaen's grants lapsed and were later regranted by Peter Styuyvesant. Francisco's property subsequently became the Van Cortlandt farm.<sup>109</sup>

Significantly, the lands the Africans gained control over in the 1640s were either adjacent to or not far removed (northwest and northeast) from the tract that later would become identified with the Negroes' Burying Ground. Although their property sometimes abutted white-owned farms, these grants given to blacks served primarily as a buffer intended to forestall Native American reprisals against the Dutch. If the African Burial

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<sup>106</sup>Dickenson, "Abstracts of Early Black Manhattanites," 116:166.

<sup>107</sup> Swan, "The Other Fort Amsterdam," 35.

<sup>108</sup> Stokes, *Iconography*, 4:75, 76, 81, 123.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:87.

Ground came into existence during this period, the remoteness of the area would have benefited the Africans in that it provided a shield from the watchful eyes of whites and satisfied the preference of traditionalists among them to bury their dead in *mfinda* or wild (undeveloped) places.

#### 4.8 *Burial Rites*

Unfortunately, extant records do not permit us to glimpse the mortuary practices the first generations followed, but likely they embraced those that had been familiar to Central Africans. Those customs ranged from rites associated with Catholic Christianity to those shaped by traditional worship. Among the Kongoleses, Christian rites tended to be more pronounced in burial practices than in any other rituals. Kongoleses Christians preferred to bury their dead in cemeteries at the churches, which they considered hallowed ground. Those who came from more distant parts of the kingdom and the interior, or ordinary villagers, would have followed practices that contained more traditional elements. Culturally biased European observers had great difficulty understanding or appreciating traditional African burial rites. In 1705, for instance, Father Lorenzo da Lucca described in detail the burials that he witnessed in Soyo, one of the most Christian areas of Kongo. In the case of the death of a child, he wrote, all the kinsmen are informed, and they come crying. With the family encircling the deceased, the lamentations lasted several days. If the husband died, “the wife goes to the crossroads where a close relative of the husband shaves her hair. Afterwards she jumps and sings and makes other motions as if she were insane.” Da Lucca continued:



Then she returns to her house and calls a grandnephew with whom she undertakes a new ceremony: she lies on the floor and makes the grand nephew jump over her from one side to the other three times.<sup>110</sup>

As this example suggests, certain traditional funeral practices persisted, even with the penetration of Catholic Christianity throughout the Central African region. Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi observed in the 1660s the practice in the Ndongo and Matamba regions of burying the dead far away from the towns and cities (libatas). In reference to the ceremony itself, Cavazzi wrote:

their custom is to carry their dead people tied onto the mat on top of which they slept and died, and in burying the corpse they put the mat on the grave, with the stake on which they loaded the dead person, the basket which they use to dig the earth, and the handle of the hoe, holding it to be a bad omen to come back to the house with something which was used for the dead person, and many of them also bury all the things that they used in life.<sup>111</sup>

Of noble burials, Cavazzi observed, “the grave (imbila) is a deep pit of at least [the depth] of a man’s height where they put the dead person, not on his back but lying on the face and body to the right or left so that his spirit will not come out.” Once he is placed in the pit, Cavazzi continued, “all throw earth on him, beginning with the priest and when it is full they raise up stones in a pyramidal form.”<sup>112</sup> In some regions, he indicated, the people built above-ground tombs that sometimes measured several meters high and were decorated with intricate designs. Funerals often lasted as long as eight days. Mourners supplied food and drink at the interment and sang songs in honor of the

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<sup>110</sup> Quoted in J. Cuveilier, *Relations sur le Congo du Père Laurent de Lucques, 1700-1717* (Bruxelles: Marnixlaan, 1953), 138.

<sup>111</sup> Cavazzi left the chapter number blank when writing this. It likely refers to Araldi MSS, book 2, 219-220, where Njinga’s funeral is discussed. See Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi da Montecuccolo, *Istorica Descrizione de’tre regni Congo, Matamba ed Angola* (Bologna, 1687), book. 1.

<sup>112</sup> Cavazzi, *Istorica Descrizione*, Book 1:84.

deceased.<sup>113</sup> A 1920s ethnographic account for the eastern area confirmed the longevity of these customs. Amandus Johnson saw graves being dug and noted that they were seven to eight feet deep with a round or rectangular mound above-ground and noted that someone had to carry the corpse down into the grave.<sup>114</sup>

#### 4.9 *Freedom by Degrees*

Landownership coincided with the manumission act of 1644 that conferred conditional freedom on a group of men (presumably the original 11 acquired in the 1620s) who had labored for the Company for nearly two decades. The decree came after the men, citing the hardship of feeding their children, petitioned for release from the Company's service. Although it put them and their wives at liberty as a reward for their many years of service and granted them land for cultivation, the measure required that the men "shall be bound to pay for the freedom they receive, each man for himself annually...thirty skepels of Maize or Wheat, Pease or Beans, and one Fat hog, valued at twenty guilders..."<sup>115</sup> Moreover, it obligated them to render aid to the Company "by water or on land, where their services are required, on receiving fair wages." Failure to meet these requirements would result in "a return back into the said Company's

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 1:136.

<sup>114</sup> University Museum, Philadelphia, 3/8 Amandus Johnson Papers, "Religion, Customs and Manners of the Bimbero, Massongo, and Others, 1922.

<sup>115</sup> *Laws and Ordinances of New Netherland*, 36.

slavery.”<sup>116</sup> Even more disturbing, their children, “at present born or yet to be born,” remained enslaved.<sup>117</sup>

As many have recognized, this granting of “half-freedom” occurred at a time of crisis for the colony. War with Native Americans and the need for production of foodstuffs to feed the colony (as well as its laborers), convinced the Company to set up a buffer zone between the European settlers and Native Americans and to seek a solution to the food shortage.<sup>118</sup> African homesteads would serve as a defensive perimeter and African men would be enlisted to repel Indian incursions. Whatever the motives of the Dutch officials, African peoples took this opportunity to strengthen their sense of community and to carve out an existence for themselves that circumvented the marginal status that had been thrust upon them.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 36-37.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 37. In 1649, the Remonstrance of New Netherland, a petition to the Dutch government to seize control of the colony from Peter Stuyvesant, complained, among other things, that: “There are yet sundry other Negroes in this country, some of whom have been manumitted on account of their long service; but their children continue slaves, contrary to all public law, that anyone born of a free Christian mother should, notwithstanding, be a slave, and obliged so to remain.” In answering this complaint, the Company indicated that only three of the children were “in service.” One resided on the Stuyvesant bowery, one was at “the Hope,” and the third labored for a man who had raised her. See *DRCHNY* 1:302 and 343.

<sup>118</sup> Swan, “The Other Fort Amsterdam,” 34-35. Swan has also suggested in “Slaves and Slaveholding” that the granting of plots of land to the African laborers was a conscious effort to segregate them from the rest of the population. He contends that Director Kieft likely would have taken this time to create a separate burial ground near this community of black people.

<sup>119</sup> The stipulations governing the emancipation of three women in 1662 sheds further light on Dutch attitudes and practices concerning the granting of freedom to African laborers. In that year the women petitioned Governor Stuyvesant and the council for release from bondage and was granted freedom on the condition that one of them would perform his housework on a weekly basis. Council Minutes [vol. 10, pt. 1], *Calendar of Dutch Historical Manuscripts*, 242.

## 5.0 *Change and Adjustment*

### 5.1 *Introduction*

When in 1664 the English seized the colony of New Netherland and renamed it and its most populous town New York, approximately 700 African and African-descended people lived there. Just over half of this number lived and labored in what formerly was New Amsterdam. Within a few decades, however, a steady importation of enslaved laborers significantly increased these numbers. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the black population colony-wide had risen to 2,000 in an overall population of perhaps 18,000 inhabitants. Approximately 700 blacks, representing a diversity of origins and a new demographic pattern, lived in the city of New York.<sup>120</sup>

In the second half of the seventeenth century, New York Africans experienced other significant changes as well. English rule brought with it greater emphasis on order and control; hence, enslaved laborers and their free counterparts saw numerous proscriptions placed on their lives. Their response reflected a steadfast resolve to counter any challenge to their humanity.

### 5.2 *Toward Greater Diversity*

Once the English began supplying the African labor force to New York, it drew on its own patterns of slave trading. While England had begun, as had the Dutch, with privateering ventures, by the 1640s, it became involved in the direct trade with Africa.

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<sup>120</sup> James G. Lydon, "New York and the Slave Trade, 1700-1774," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d series, 35 (1978): 375-94.

Barbados merchants were the first among the English to visit Africa for direct trade in captives, and, like the Dutch, they began in the Allada to Calabar corridor in West Africa. New England merchants with Barbadian connections followed suit, and by 1645, they ventured to Senegal and Sierra Leone to obtain people as well.<sup>121</sup> Eventually, the trade to New York included people from all the areas of Africa to which English ships sailed. By 1700, the New York African population consisted of people with diverse origins, including those brought in via the British West Indies or non-British ports in the Caribbean, a few from the direct trade with Africa, a small number from the sister colonies on the British North American mainland, and, of course, native-born New Yorkers.

Before the end of the seventeenth century, New York witnessed the importation of several hundred people from the island of Madagascar as well. The Malagasy had arrived in the 1680s and 1690s via an illegal trade between New York merchants and East African pirates.<sup>122</sup> Prominent merchants in the city presumably had hired the ship *Fortune* to make annual visits to Madagascar for the purpose of acquiring human cargoes. Members of the Phillipse family, for instance—especially Frederick and Adolph—were avid participants in this illegal trade. The Phillippes routinely furnished the pirates stationed at St. Mary’s Bay (Madagascar) with gunpowder and rum in order to carry out their activities.<sup>123</sup> Elizabeth Donnan has indicated that New Yorkers were attracted to the

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<sup>121</sup> Larry Gragg, “‘To Procure Negroes’: The English Slave Trade to Barbados, 1627-60,” *Slavery and Abolition* 16 (1995):65-84. This article’s range is wider than the title suggests.

<sup>122</sup> Virginia Platt suggests that the Madagascar trade took place as early as the 1670s. See her “The East India Company and the Madagascar Slave Trade,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d series, 4 (1969): 548-577.

<sup>123</sup> Lydon, “New York and the Slave Trade,” 376.

Madagascar trade because an enslaved person purchased in this manner could be acquired for ten shillings worth of English goods as compared with the £3 to £4 cost for Africans on the West Coast.<sup>124</sup> Illegal trading in Madagascar persisted sporadically until 1721 when the Privy Council brought the activity to a halt.<sup>125</sup>

Prior to the English Civil War (1642-49), there had been two companies engaged in the African trade, but Oliver Cromwell's government removed the monopoly. With the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, however, Charles II chartered a new "exclusive African Company, at the Head of which was the Duke of York," and many other prominent Englishmen. When immediate success did not result, Charles constituted a new company in which he and the Duke of York, his brother, held shares.<sup>126</sup> Significantly, New York's trade with Africa was carried out with the colony's proprietor (and England's future king) intimately involved.

### 5.3 *Transition under British Rule*

The Duke of York's position as shareholder in the Royal African Company presaged the status New York Africans would endure under English rule. In fact, by the mid-seventeenth century, slavery existed in law or custom throughout the Americas, in the Spanish, Portuguese, French, Dutch, and Danish colonies as well as in the British West Indies. On the British North American mainland, African peoples were the recipients of disparate treatment long before Virginia passed a law in 1661 codifying

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<sup>124</sup> *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade*, 6:440.

<sup>125</sup> Platt, "The East India Company and the Madagascar Slave Trade," 576.

<sup>126</sup> Long Papers, British Library: Add MS 38,416, fol. 301-304.

slavery. When the English gained control of the Dutch colony in 1664, they drew on their own experiences in the Americas as well as those of other European nations.

Shortly after they arrived, the English codified slavery in the colony through the 1664 Articles of Capitulation, which acknowledged the legitimate claim of Dutch slaveholders to their human property. A year later, Duke's Laws stipulated that "No Christian shall be kept in Bondslavery, villenage or Captivity, Except Such who shall be Judged thereunto by Authority, or such as willingly have sould, or shall sell themselves." This law sought to legalize what had already been accepted in custom: the limiting of slavery to non-Christians, in essence to people of color.<sup>127</sup> It was not intended that christianized slaves should be freed.

For the rest of the century, the English sought to circumscribe the lives of both free Africans and the enslaved. They forbade the latter freedom of movement by making it illegal to leave one's owner's residence without permission, to congregate in groups of four or more on the streets or at the tea water pump, or to be entertained in taverns, tippling houses, or any establishments where they could purchase liquor or other goods. A 1681 proclamation issued by the mayor and alderman expressly forbade residents to "Harbour Intertain or Countenance any Indian or Neger Slaue Whatsoever in their Houses or Otherwise or to sell or Deliver to them any Wine Rumm or other strong Liquor, or receive or take from Such Indian or Neger slaues any mony or other Goods on account Whatsoever."<sup>128</sup> A year later, another order was issued warning against Africans

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<sup>127</sup> *DRCHNY*, 2:250-53; *Colonial Laws*, I:18. The general consensus is that the English used the term "Christian" to mean European.

<sup>128</sup> *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1765-1776* (hereafter *MCC*), 8 vols. (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1905), 1:86.

congregating together and engaging in sports and other activities without a pass.<sup>129</sup>

Apparently, such gatherings were especially troublesome on Sundays, while the owners of enslaved people were occupied with seeking absolution for their sins. The order alluded to:

many Greate Evills and Inconveniencys [committed by] Negros and Indian Slaves their frequent meetings and Gathering themselves together in Greate numbers on the Lords Day and att Other unseasonable times using And Exerciseing Severall Rude and Unlawful sports and pasetimes to the Dishonour of God Profanacon of his holy Day Breach and Disturbance of the Peace and Quiett of His Magesties Subjects many whereof are Likewise Drawed aside and Mislead to be spectators of such their Evill Practices and thereby Diverted from the more Suitable and Pious Duty And Service of the Day.<sup>130</sup>

These gatherings underscore the mobility enjoyed by African men (especially in a city accustomed to the practice of hiring out) as well as reflecting the determination of African peoples to fashion an existence separate and apart from their owners.

Free people suffered proscription of their lives as well. They incurred significant fines if found guilty of selling goods to enslaved people or entertaining them in their homes or places of business or otherwise supporting their unlawful activities.<sup>131</sup> In 1670, for instance, Domingo and Manuel Angola received a warning from the court, which they were instructed to convey to the rest of the free African population:

The free Negroes were from time to time entertaining sundry of the servants and Negroes belonging to the Burghers and inhabitants of this City to the great damage of the owners: thereupon they are strictly charged by the Court not to entertain from now henceforth any servants or helps whether Christians or Negroes on pain of forfeiting their freedom in case it were found, that they shall have

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<sup>129</sup> Manuscript Records of the Court of Assizes, New York Municipal Archives, 35-36.

<sup>130</sup> MCC, 1:92 (October 1681); *Collections of the New York Historical Society*, 1912:37-38.

<sup>131</sup> MCC, 1:86 (March 1681); 1:2 (October 1682); 1912:37-38; MCC 1:132-141 (March 1683); MCC 1:276-7 (August 1692).



harboured any servants or helps or others longer than 24 hours; which they were likewise ordered to communicate to other remaining free Negroes.<sup>132</sup>

In addition to attempting to control the social behavior of enslaved people, the English sought to protect white men from black economic competition. In 1683, the Common Council enacted measures that prohibited men of African descent from driving a cart in the city (except brewers' drays) and, in 1686, from loading goods at the bridge, weighhouse, or market house.<sup>133</sup> A measure passed in 1691 forbade "Boys or Negros" from driving carts in the city without a license, presumably even if they were working under the direction of their owners.<sup>134</sup> Such laws were intended not only to protect licensed cartmen and porters from competition, but also to keep Africans from benefiting from lucrative employment that utilized unskilled labor.

Economic restrictions and social proscriptions weighed heavily on free Africans. Denied equal access to the marketplace, they had few avenues by which to provide for their families. Parents burdened by too many dependents and too meager an income sometimes chose to apprentice their children to local tradesmen and farmers. In this way, boys might receive adequate food and clothing, in addition to training at felt-making, farming, barbering, brewing, block making, and coopering. Girls learned to spin, sew, knit, and pursue "any other manner of housewifery."<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> *Records of New Amsterdam from 1653 to 1674*, 6:286.

<sup>133</sup> *MCC* 1:132-141 (March 1683); *MCC* 1:180 (July 1686).

<sup>134</sup> *MCC* 1:219 (April 1691).

<sup>135</sup> *Indentures of Apprenticeship, 1691, February 9, 1694-January 29, 1708, Collections*, New York Historical Society (1885), 578.

To avoid being identified as indolent, becoming a public charge, or facing corporal punishment for vagrancy, some black men (and Native Americans) entered into indentures as well. Perhaps this was the motivation of Bastian Congo who, in 1696, entered into such a work arrangement. Described as “A free Negro Man Aged twenty Seven Years or thereabouts...” he apprenticed himself to the Kip family, owners of a Manhattan farm. The term of service was stipulated as one year at the rate of thirty shillings per month.<sup>136</sup>

Despite such economic challenges, Africans pressed to gain some measure of independence. Those who enjoyed free status attempted to hold onto the lands they had been granted during Dutch rule. Generally, they had their ground-briefs confirmed by the incoming English governor, Richard Nicolls. Although some of this property fell into the hands of the silversmith, Garret Onckelbagg, who purchased many of the plots of land originally owned by the blacks who inhabited the northwestern stretch above the Fresh Water,<sup>137</sup> a thriving community of black farmers was still evident when in 1679, Jasper Danckaerts observed it in his travels through the former Dutch colony. “We went from the city, following the Broadway, over the valley or the Fresh water,” Danckaerts wrote.

Upon both sides of this way were many habitations of negroes, mulattoes and whites; These negroes were formerly the proper slaves of the [West India] Company but in consequence of the frequent changes and conquests of the country, they have obtained their freedom and settled themselves down where they have thought proper, and thus on this road, where they have ground enough to live on with their families.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 570-71.

<sup>137</sup> See Stokes, *Iconography*, 4:75, 81.

<sup>138</sup> Jasper Danckaerts, *Journal of Jasper Danckaerts, 1679-1860*, eds. Bartlett Burleigh James and J. Franklin Jameson (New York, 1913), 65.

For the rest of the century and into the next, New York Africans would try to repeat the relative success of these earlier black inhabitants. Their efforts would be hindered by the more systematic exploitation imposed by the British as they sought to build the colony according to their own design.

## 6.0 *African Origins of Enslaved New Yorkers during the Period of English Rule*

### 6.1 *Introduction*

The black community of New York in 1679 had doubtless been enlarged by imports of enslaved laborers from West Africa. The *Wittepaert's* arrival from the “Bight of Benin” in 1655, likely represented the first cargo of West Africans purchased on the coast and brought directly to New Amsterdam. Although its log provided no information regarding a specific point of departure, the ship could have come from the Allada region or the area around New Calabar, where Dutch factors had been buying enslaved people. Or, it may have sailed to both areas, beginning in Allada and ending at New Calabar or even Gabon.<sup>139</sup>

In the late 1650s the stream of laborers from the direct trade of Allada and Calabar sometimes included West Central Africans purchased on the coast by the factor at Loango, as a few cargoes of people from that port arrived just before the English captured New Amsterdam. One of these shipments came on board the *Gideon* two weeks before English takeover, and consisted of 290 people, transported from Curaçao by way of “Guinea, Angola, and Cayenne.”<sup>140</sup> But from this point on, West Africans became the largest African group imported into New York.

The regions from which the West Africans originated consisted of five areas: the Senegambia, the Sierra Leone-Liberia area, the Gold Coast, the Bight of Benin, and the

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<sup>139</sup> “Ordinance Imposing a Duty on Exported Slaves,” in *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade*, 6:70. For conditions of Dutch trading in this area, see the Leiden MS, fols. 10-12, in *West Africa in the Mid-Seventeenth Century: An Anonymous Dutch Manuscript*, ed by Adam Jones (Atlanta: African Studies Association Press, 1995).

<sup>140</sup> *DRCHNY* 2:430. Three hundred had sailed—160 men and 140 women—but nine had died. Eighty-nine of the survivors were suspected of being over 36 years old and were judged “a very poor lot.” See also *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade*, 3:433; and “Introduction” to *Voyages of the Slavers “St. John” and “New Amsterdam*, ed. Edmund B. O’Callaghan (Albany: J. Munsell, 1867).

Niger Delta. Great political fragmentation characterized these areas throughout much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As a consequence, certain polities were vulnerable to attack and their people enslaved. The political instability thus created also led to the kinds of lawlessness that produced banditry and raids conducted for the explicit purpose of acquiring captives for the slave trade.

## 6.2 *The Senegambian Region*

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the period in which Africans destined for New York were being procured, the Senegambia was divided politically into a number of states (see Map 6.1).<sup>141</sup> Along the lower Senegal lay the remnants of the older Jolof empire of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Waalo and Jolof were situated on the river itself, and south along the coast lay the states of Kajoor and Bawol.<sup>142</sup> Along the middle and upper Senegal was the remnant of the once powerful empire of the “Great Fulo” which had dominated the Senegal in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

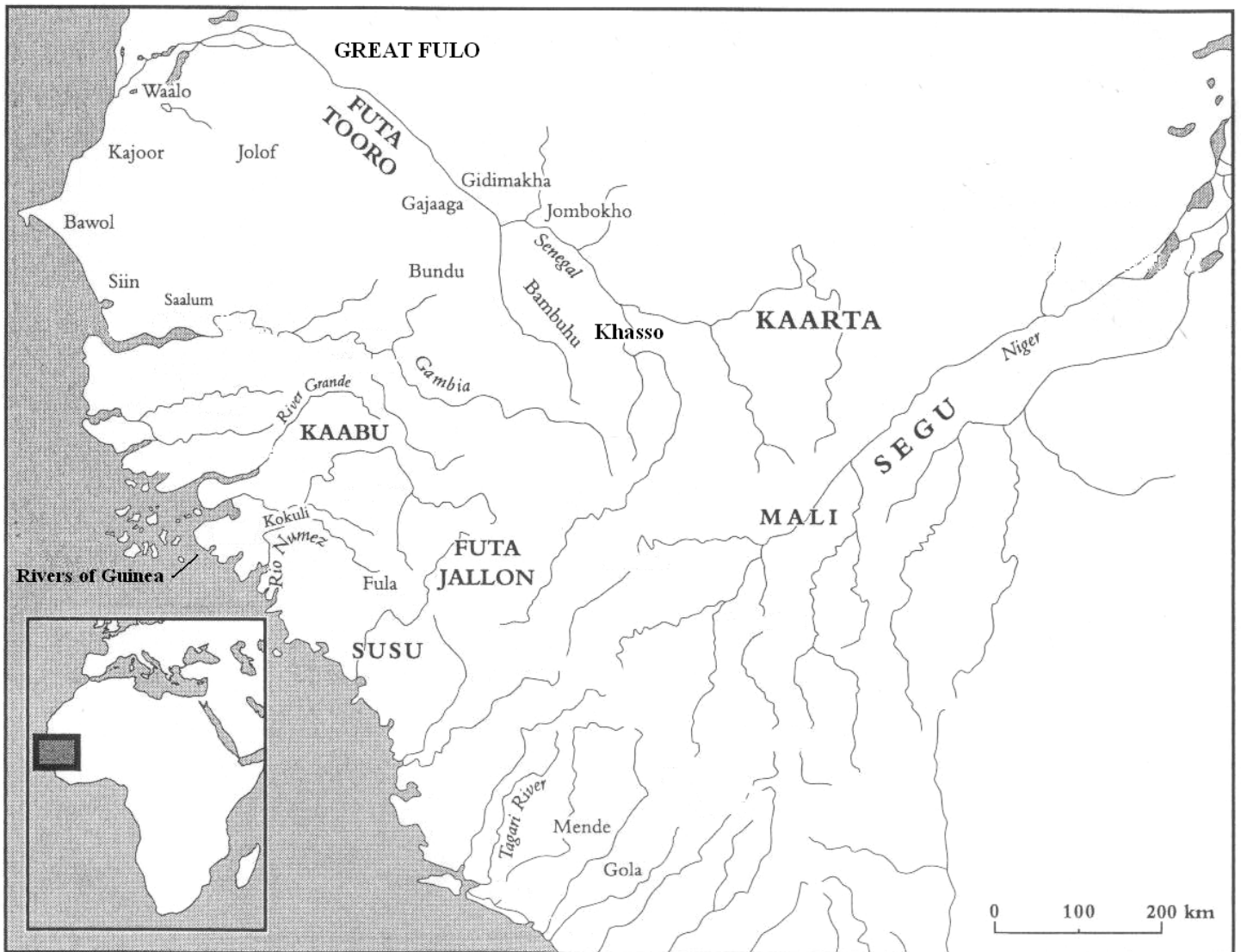
In the later seventeenth century the empire of Great Fulo had given way to loosely governed groups of states under rulers bearing the title “Satigi”. Futa Tooro, the former

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<sup>141</sup> For a good overview of the history of the region see Boubacar Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, original French, 1988) and Philip Curtin, *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa: Senegambia in the Era of the Slave Trade*. 2 vols. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975). See also the overview by Jean Boulègue and Jean Suret-Canale, “The Western Atlantic Coast,” in *History of West Africa*, eds. A.F. Ade Ajayi and Michael Crowder, 2 vols., 3d edition (Harlow: Longman, 1985), 1: 503-30.

<sup>142</sup> On the earliest history, see Jean Boulègue, *Le Grand Jolof (XIIIe-XVIe siècle)* (Paris, 1987), and for the Waalo state and to some degree its neighbors as well, Boubacar Barry, *Le royaume du Waalo. Le Sénégal avant la conquête* (Paris: F. Maspero, 1972).

core of the empire, formed a state of its own, but it was ravaged during much of this time by a civil war between rival kings, local powers, and the Moors of the southern Sahara



**Map 6.1: The Senegambia Region, West Africa** (adapted from a map in John Thornton, *Warfare in Atlantic Africa*).

desert. Less significant states included Bundu, an Islamic theocracy,<sup>143</sup> Gajaaga,<sup>144</sup> Gidimakha, Khasso,<sup>145</sup> and Bambuku.<sup>146</sup> These states suffered frequent incursions from the desert Arabs and the Moroccans.<sup>147</sup> The invasions never resulted in firm conquest but often created major political and military upheavals. The Moroccans participated indirectly in Senegambian politics, assisting one or the other side in civil wars but not always acting in concert. Although they frequently joined with indigenous nomadic Arabs from the southern desert, they never managed to control the Senegambians. At best, they exercised a tributary relationship over the Senegal, as they did over Futa Tooro in the last half of the eighteenth century.<sup>148</sup>

Farther east lay the most distant areas of the Empire of Segu, which constituted the dominant power on the upper Niger. The Moroccan conquest of the Niger bend destroyed Songhay's control over the northern part of this area in the early seventeenth century but had failed to extend their power much to the south. The inability of the Moroccans to control the area resulted in separation from the Senegal system of rivers

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<sup>143</sup> Michael A. Gomez, *Pragmatism in the Age of Jihad. The Precolonial State of Bundu* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>144</sup> Abdoulaye Bathily, *Les portes de l'or. Le royaume de Galam (Sénégal) de l'ère musulmane au temps des négriers (VIII-XVIII siècles)* (Paris, 1989).

<sup>145</sup> Sékéne Mody Cissoko, *Contribution à l'histoire politique du Khasso dans le Haut-Sénégal des origines à 1854* (Paris, 1986).

<sup>146</sup> Archives Nationales de France, C6/9. For a division into three regional powers and many local "farines" (fareen) which were semi-independent of the kings, see Claude Boucard, "Relation du Bambouc, 1729," *Bulletin de l'Institut fondamental d'Afrique noire*, eds. Philip Curtin and Jean Boulègue, 36 (1974): 254-60.

<sup>147</sup> See James Searing, *West African Slavery and the Atlantic Commerce: The Senegal River Valley, 1700-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>148</sup> On the desert in general and its relationship with the Sahel states, see James Webb, *Desert Frontier: Ecological and Economic Change along the Western Sahel, 1600-1850* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995).

and the Atlantic. The emergence of Segu in the early eighteenth century, however, reestablished political links between the Niger and Upper Senegal. A polity was founded at Kaarta at the western reaches of the Senegal basin which, by 1750, had become independent. Segu was the only power from the Niger Basin that participated in the Atlantic commercial system, as the Middle Niger states were oriented much more towards the desert for their external trade.<sup>149</sup>

South of the Senegal zone, along the coast, lay the smaller political entities of the fiercely independent Serers, principally Siin and Saalum. To their south, along the Gambia, lay a chain of small Mande states which had been subjected to the Mali Empire in the fifteenth century. The Empire of Kaabu dominated the area known as the “Rivers of Guinea,” formed where the smaller rivers that rose from Futa Jallon fell into the sea south of the Gambia. Kaabu gained its independence when Mali collapsed in the early seventeenth century. Over the years, it retained considerable authority over the “Rivers of Guinea” but wielded less power in the swampy regions and twisted creeks of the coast.

The political unity that existed in the region during the period of Mali’s dominance devolved into political fragmentation when the empire declined. However, the trading networks that had developed during Mali’s rule continued to unite the region economically.<sup>150</sup> Those networks centered around the towns of Jakha, located on the

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<sup>149</sup> On Segu see, Richard Roberts, *Warriors, Merchants, and Slaves: The State and the Economy in the Middle Niger Valley, 1700-1914* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1987) and Sundiata A. Djata, *The Bamana Empire by the Niger: Kingdom, Jihad and Colonization, 1712-1920* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 1997).

<sup>150</sup> Martin Fernandez de Enciso, *Suma de Geographia q[ue] trata de todas las partidas & provincias del mundo...* (Seville, 1519), 107-109 (original is unpaginated; there is pencil pagination of copy in Biblioteca Nacional de Lisboa, Reservados, 717v); Jean Fonteneau dit Alphonse de Saintonge [João Afonso], *La Cosmographie avec l’esperance et regime du soleil...* ed. Georges Musset (Paris, 1904), fol. 122v-124 (pagination of original).



Bafing River (an affluent of the Senegal) and Ja in Gajaaga (on the Senegal itself).<sup>151</sup>

They helped to integrate the Senegambia, as traders went from one part of the region to another carrying goods and transporting people for sale. The various ethnicities spoke the same language and devoutly followed Islam.

### 6.3 *The Sierra Leone-Liberia Region*

In the mid-sixteenth century much of the Sierra Leone-Liberia region was loosely united by the conquest of the Manes. Their kingdom, headquartered in the southern end of the region (around the Cape Mount area of modern Liberia), was known in seventeenth-century sources as “Kquoja Kingdom”. It was loosely structured, leaving most administration in the hands of the older ruling families or families of Mane origin who settled in older states and continued their law. By the eighteenth century, central administration was non-existent. However, there were still connections between the ruling families, especially the regional ones developed and maintained by the Poro Society and others such as the Ragbenle and Simo, which had served as inter-state adjudicating bodies along the coast since before the fifteenth century.<sup>152</sup> Less is known about the interior regions, except that the mountainous areas were briefly integrated into the Empire of Mali in medieval times and had significant populations of Muslims.

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<sup>151</sup> For the overview that follows see especially Philip Curtin, *Economic Change in Pre-colonial Africa: Senegambia in the Era of the Slave Trade*. 2 vols. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975), 1:59-91.

<sup>152</sup> The best secondary literature on the early history of the region (although dated) includes Walter Rodney's *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast, 1545-1800* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970). See also Adam Jones, *From Slaves to Palm Kernels: A History of the Galinhas Country, 1730-1890* (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1983) and, for earlier times, “The Kqoja Kingdom: A Forest State in Seventeenth Century West Africa,” *Paideuma* 29 (1983). P. E. H. Hair has also published long and useful treatises on the earlier history of the region in his annotations to Hair and Avelino Teixeira da Mota, eds. and trans., *An Account of Sierra Leone and the Rivers of Guinea of Cape Verde* (Lisbon, 1977).

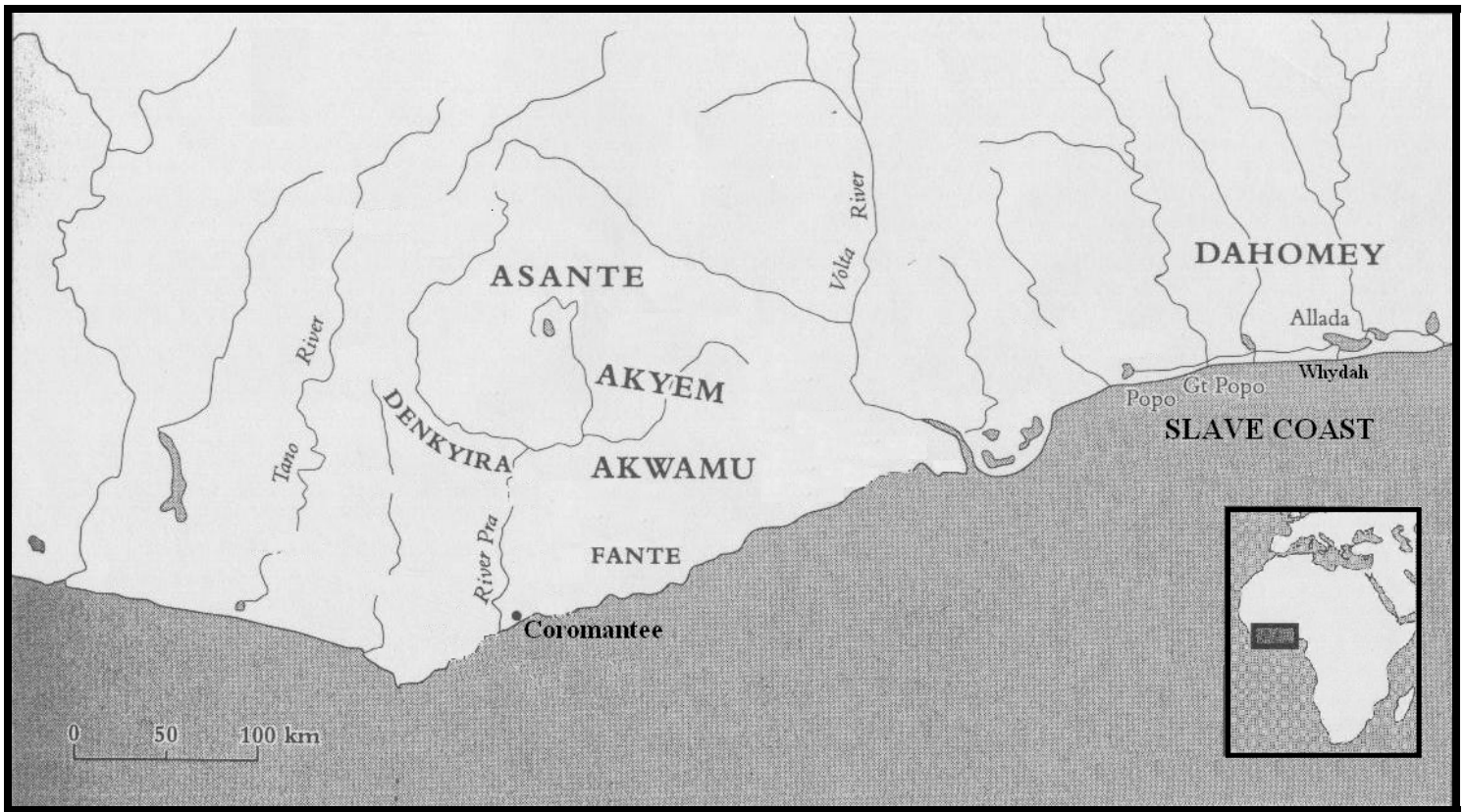
#### 6.4 *The Gold Coast Region*

The coast south of the central part of modern Liberia (known variously as the Ivory, Kwa Kwa, Grain, or Pepper Coast), participated only to a limited degree in the Atlantic trade. European and American traders stopped along this coast to take in supplies, cloth, water, and (on occasion) captives, but the region resisted greater participation in the trade in human beings. This zone extended as far along the coast as the eastern part of modern Côte d'Ivoire, or the western boundary of the Gold Coast zone.

The Gold Coast region (see Map 6.2) became thickly forested as one moved inland a few miles. For most of its length, the people spoke the Akan (or Twi) language, while on the eastern end, the Gã language prevailed. Farther east still, languages such as Ewe predominated. Everywhere along the coast, however, Akan became the *lingua franca*, sometimes alongside creolized forms of Portuguese and, later, English. These eastern regions served as a refuge for thousands who fled wars in the region farther west, and beginning in the 1680s the area became distinctly multi-lingual and multi-cultural as refugees arrived from those areas. Later, especially in the early eighteenth century, Fon-speaking refugees from the east, fleeing the wars of Dahomian expansion, contributed to the polyglot nature of the Volta region.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> For a good review of the problems and challenges of this region, see Sandra Greene, *Gender, Ethnicity, and Social Change on the Upper Slave Coast: A History of Anlo-Ewe* (Portsmouth, NH and London: Heinemann and James Currey, Ltd., 1996).



**Map 6.2: The Gold Coast and Slave Coast, West Africa (adapted from a map in John Thornton, *Warfare in Atlantic Africa*).**

In the seventeenth century the Gold Coast was divided into dozens of independent states, each sovereign unto itself, most rarely extending more than about 50 kilometers from the central settlement. Until the last half of the century, it did not participate in the slave trade. In fact, its primary export was gold and Europeans actually imported captives to this area from other regions to pay for this coveted commodity.<sup>154</sup>

The political situation in the Gold Coast changed significantly in the eighteenth century. The area experienced the rise of stronger confederacies and more centralized governments. Denkyira, Akwamu, Akyem, and Asante all began a process of federation and political consolidation during the first years of the eighteenth century. Asante, which increasingly became the most important state, won notable victories over its neighbors (Denkyira in 1701 and Akyem in 1742), but these victories did not bring much centralization. It was not until the later eighteenth century that Asante also began a more systematic administrative centralization in the aftermath of strong revolts that nearly unhinged the whole state in the 1750s.<sup>155</sup>

The construction of great roads through the rainforest that allowed Asante armies to deploy quickly and prevented smaller armies from being able to hold out by blocking strategic paths marked Asante's centralization.<sup>156</sup> By the end of the century only Fante, a federation that arose partly in response to the challenge of Asante and partly through its

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<sup>154</sup> Ray Kea, *Settlements, Trade and Politics in the Seventeenth Century Gold Coast* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982). The causes for the shift from gold exports to slave exports and even the bizarre situation of gold imports to pay for captives have been addressed by several scholars. See, for instance, Walter Rodney, "Gold and Slaves on the Gold Coast," *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 10 (1969) for variant interpretations of the transformation.

<sup>155</sup> J. K. Fynn, *Asante and its Neighbours, 1700-1807* (London: Longman, 1971); for the later period, see Ivor Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century: The Structure and Evolution of a Political Order* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

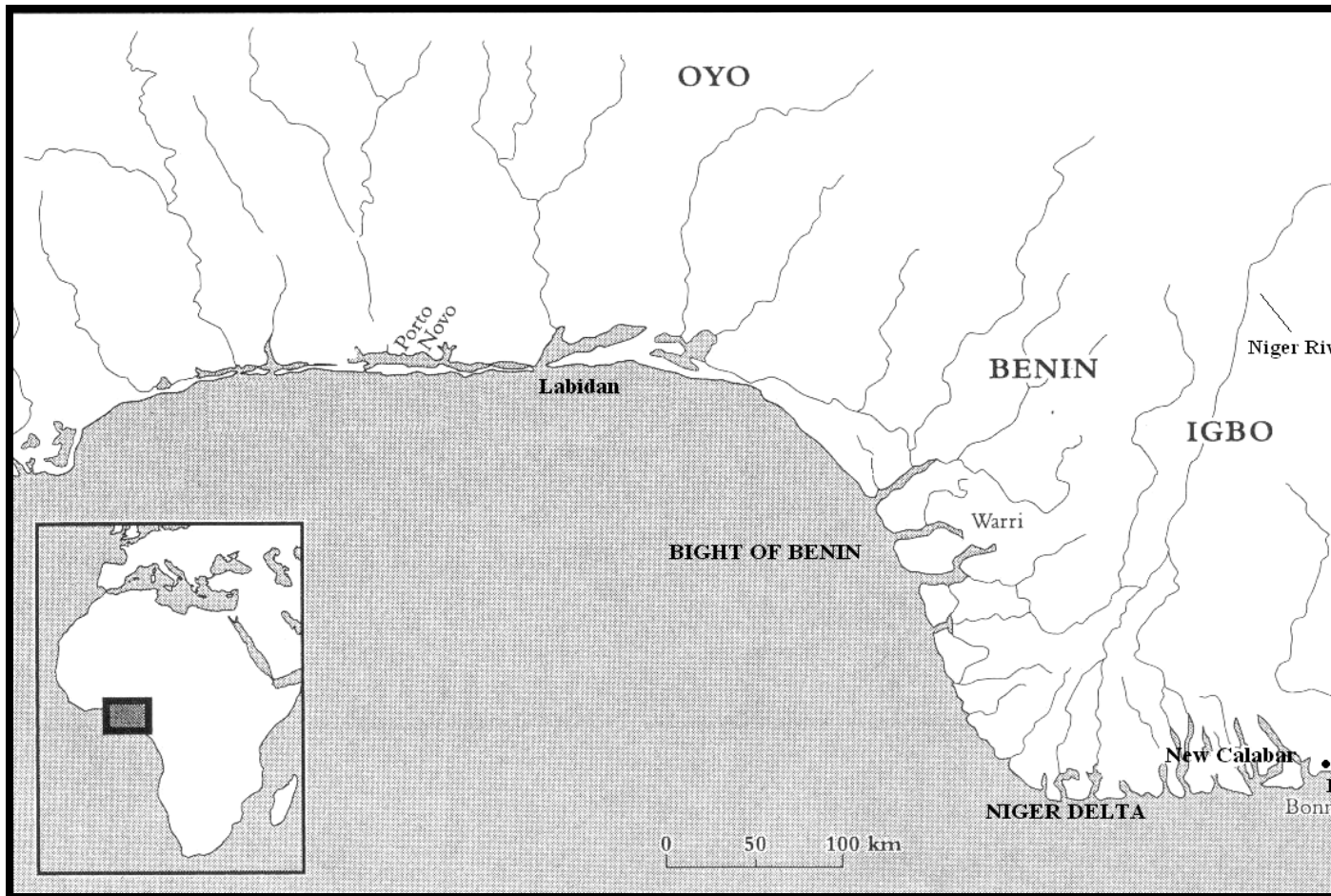
<sup>156</sup> Thornton, *Warfare in Atlantic Africa*, 72-3.

own initiatives, remained as a polity strong enough to challenge Asante authority in the Gold Coast region.

#### 6.5 *The Bight of Benin Region*

The Bight of Benin region was often called the “Slave Coast” in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries because it was the first region in Lower Guinea to supply large numbers of captives to the Atlantic trade. Its central feature was the “Gap of Benin” where a broad swath of the West African savanna reached down to the coast. It bordered on the Volta region on the east, where refugees from wars in the Gap fled and sometimes where raiders, drawn from refugees from the Gold Coast, also found their bases. On the west, it ran into the Niger Delta region, land of dense swamps, heavy forests, and numerous creeks and rivers (see Map 6.3). In the western portions of the Bight of Benin zone the language was Ewe, while Fon prevailed in the southern zone from the coast until well into the interior. Yoruba was spoken in the eastern parts of the region, from the coast and well into the interior.

In the seventeenth century the coastal regions were largely integrated into the empire of Benin whose lands stretched westward as far as Labidan on the Gold Coast. Although Benin’s power waned in the early seventeenth century, it left a heritage that was still discussed as active tradition in the Accra region as late as the 1740s. When Benin lost control, local powers such as Allada emerged. Allada dominated the coast in the mid-seventeenth century but began to lose control over outlying areas as the century wore on. Successor states, such as Whydah, became independent, as did Great Popo.



**Map 6.3: The Bight of Benin and Niger Delta, West Africa (adapted from a map in**

**John Thornton, *Warfare in Atlantic Africa*).**

This political fragmentation was reshaped by the emergence of the Kingdom of Dahomey in the early eighteenth century. In 1724, Dahomey soldiers entered Allada, forcing its rulers to flee to the lagoon region, where they founded the town that became Porto Novo and remained a formidable foe to Dahomey for the rest of the century. Dahomey never developed sufficient naval resources to make a decisive attack on the rival dynasty. The same pattern was repeated when Dahomey took over Whydah in 1727. Again the rulers fled, this time westward, to found Little Popo, which was also an irritant to Dahomey, and like Porto Novo, was able to muster sufficient water-borne forces to prevent Dahomey from seizing control.

The rulers of Dahomey created a highly centralized kingdom over the eighteenth century. By century's end, a Brazilian priest, Vicente Ferreira Pires, noted a complex administrative structure with many layers extending from local officials to the king. The king had substantial legal powers to distribute land, oversee commerce, and determine who could and could not conduct business in certain commodities.<sup>157</sup>

Dahomey's ascendance was checked, however, by the Oyo Empire, whose capital was located far to the north.<sup>158</sup> Oyo gained strength from its great cavalry armies, the consequence of being able to raise horses in their lands. From 1728 until 1747, Oyo armies invaded Dahomey on a regular basis. While they could not remain in the southern part of the Gap for a whole year due to the disease environment that killed their horses,

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<sup>157</sup> Vicente Ferreira Pires, *Viagem de África em o Reino de Dahomé*, ed. Clado Riberio de Lessa (São Paulo, 1957), 21-26; 35; 74-7; 98-102, 111-114. There are less developed earlier descriptions, for example, in Robert Norris, *Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahádee, King of Dahomey an Inland Country of Guiney* (London, 1789, reprint 1968), 89-91 referring to the author's visit in 1772.

<sup>158</sup> On Oyo, see Robin Law, *The Oyo Empire, c. 1600-c. 1836: A West African Imperialism in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).

they were eventually able to demand that Dahomey pay them tribute. Thus, for the rest of the century, Dahomey pursued an independent policy, checked and hedged from time to time by demands from Oyo.<sup>159</sup>

## 6.6 *The Niger Delta Region*

The coastal waterway ran into the great maze of the Niger Delta, an interconnected set of creeks and rivers that made navigation easy and connected the region widely. The city of Benin dominated the region in the earliest times with a great fleet of war craft that carried armies as far afield as Lagos and throughout the delta. Most of the people of the region claimed some origin in Benin, although not all were a part of its empire. Perhaps the most important of the kingdoms that claimed to owe its origin to Benin was Warri, located south of Benin. Warri was a major port, and canoe men from the country traveled far and wide on trading missions.<sup>160</sup> It was also a Christian state, having been converted by Augustinian missionaries from the Portuguese colony of São Tomé in the late sixteenth century.

On the eastern and northern sections of the Niger Delta lay the vast land of the Igbos, a country that was subdivided into some 45-50 independent villages. City-states controlled the mouths of the major waterways in the delta itself and served, from the late fifteenth century onward, as conduits for trade with Europeans. Important among them

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<sup>159</sup> For early periods see Robin Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa, 1550-1750* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); for the later period, I. A. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and its Neighbours, 1708-1818* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967).

<sup>160</sup> A good account in the mid-eighteenth century is found in Moreau de St.-Méry, "Observations sur le royaume de Ouare à la Côte d'Or en Afrique," 1784 in "Documents sur les relations entre la France et le royaume de Ouare à la Côte d'Afrique," ed. Paul Roussier (1784-1787) *Bulletin du Comité d'études historiques et scientifiques de l'Afrique occidentale française* 2 (1928): 352-85.



were Elem Kalabari (or New Calabar) at the mouth of the Niger, Ibani (Bonny), and Ndoni (Donny). Old Calabar, on the mouth of the Oil River (which was separate from the Niger system), was also connected by water routes to the points farther west and had its own system of towns that stretched northward up the river.

Europeans never went upriver beyond the city-states and therefore left very few reports of the region. What we know today of the Igbo country, the principal source of enslaved people from the region, is mostly from what Igbos who had come out as captives can tell us. Alonso de Sandoval's seventeenth-century report,<sup>161</sup> Oldendorp's mid-eighteenth century account,<sup>162</sup> and the celebrated reminiscences of Olaudah Equiano<sup>163</sup> all relied on interviews with enslaved people from the Igbo region and, in Equiano's case, from his own experience (augmented, perhaps, by interviews he conducted himself). These accounts give some details of daily life but provide little else about the history of the region, perhaps the most densely inhabited large area in West Africa.

### 6.7 *The West African Trade in Enslaved People*

As the foregoing discussion illustrates, the political climate of West Africa in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was one of perpetual change and adjustment. This

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<sup>161</sup> Alonso de Sandoval, *De Instauranda Aethiopum Salute: el mundo de la esclavitud en America*, ed. Angel Valtierra (Bogotá, 1956).

<sup>162</sup> Oldendorp, *Histoire*, 426-35.

<sup>163</sup> *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vasa, the African*, 2 vols. (London, 1789), excerpts on Africa published with commentary in G. I. Jones, "Olaudah Equiano of the River Ibo," in *Africa Remembered; Narratives by West Africans from the Era of the Slave Trade*, ed. Philip Curtin (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), 60-98.

unsettled environment was characterized by numerous armed conflicts that ultimately operated to the detriment of people and polities.

This basic truth has fostered a rather intense debate in recent years concerning methods of procurement, especially as they relate to war. One camp has emphasized the role of armed conflict motivated by primarily African (that is, civil, religious and expansionist) interests. It has suggested that a rather equitable economic relationship developed between Europeans and Africans and that the latter not only willingly traded in enslaved people but made and enforced the rules that guided the trade relationship.<sup>164</sup> The majority of people became enslaved as spoils of war. The opposing interpretation holds that wars—to the extent that they played a significant role in procurement for the trade—were the result of European demand and encouragement through the supply of guns and powder. African peoples made war on each other because their economies were so dependent on European trade and because the presence of firearms removed any incentive to settle disputes diplomatically.

A corollary of the latter argument is that the political instability exacerbated by the European presence led not simply to traditional wars but to the kinds of lawlessness that led to banditry and kidnapping. Joseph Inikori writes that “the mounting European demand for captives seriously exposed the politically fragmented communities of Atlantic Africa and the hinterland to capture and export.” Until centralized states developed and imposed law and order, kidnapping and banditry were common. These

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<sup>164</sup> See John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World; and Warfare in Atlantic Africa*. Thornton has argued that the trade in enslaved people did not cause wars but did change the strategy of many African polities who, in finding a ready market for captives, sold them rather than putting them to death.

polities were also able to protect their own people from enslavement by repelling invasion and making captives of enemy states.<sup>165</sup>

The West African experience reflected these as well as other methods of procurement. In the Senegambia, for instance, contemporaries observed instances of conflicts they termed “pillages” because the end result was the taking of real property, cattle and people for sale. In some instances, these pillages reflected certain concrete military and political objectives, but in others they amounted to little more than raids designed to take rural villagers by surprise and capture them.<sup>166</sup>

In West Africa the trade in people also coincided with the expansion of Islam. In Senegambia, for instance, the traders sometimes were Muslim clerics who, since many of the governments were Islamic, served as religious advisors and judicial authorities as well. The spread of Islam in Sierra Leone also precipitated the development of the slave trade, as Muslims came to believe that only by making war and enslaving people could they gain the munitions needed to spread the religion.<sup>167</sup>

The long range pattern of war in the Bight of Benin swelled the numbers made available for the Atlantic trade. These wars included the repeated attacks of Oyo on

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<sup>165</sup> See Joseph Inikori, “The Struggle Against the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: The Role of the State,” in *Fighting Back: African Strategies Against the Slave Trade*, ed. Sylviane Diouf (forthcoming).

<sup>166</sup> Mirabeau to Clarkson, 21 December 1789, in François Thesée, “Au Sénégal, en 1798: Traite des nègres et société africaine dans les royaumes de Sallum, de Sin et de Cayor,” in *De la traite à l’esclavage du Ve au XVIIIe siècle*, 2 vols., ed. Serge Daget (Nantes and Paris, 1988), 1: 227-8. Mirabeau’s informant was Geoffroy de Villeneuve, who resided in the region in the 1780s. See François de Paris, “Voyage à la côte d’Affrique dite de Guinée et aux Isles de l’Amérique... 1682-3,” fol. 32v-33, published in Guy Thilmans, “La relation de François de Paris (1682-1683),” *Bulletin de l’Institut fondamental de l’Afrique noire* 38 (1976), 24-5.

<sup>167</sup> James Watt, *Journal of James Watt. Expedition to Timbo Capital of the Fula Empire in 1794*, ed. Bruce Mouser (Madison, 1994), fols. 62, 76, 76v, 84, 85, 99. Thomas Winterbottom, his contemporary, argued that the regime should ban the sale of Muslims to Christians in *An Account of the Native Africans, in the Neighborhood of Sierra Leone* (London, 1803), 8.

Dahomey until mid-century, attempts by Dahomey to impose a unified government on the Mahi country to its northeast, and the long struggle between Dahomey and the refugee dynasties of Porto Novo and Little Popo. In addition to the large-scale wars were much smaller raids and cross border actions, such as the virtual constant raiding of Dahomey by Little Popo. Oldendorp's informants from Whydah felt greatly pressed by the constant wars and claimed that even in peace time one had to go about armed.<sup>168</sup>

While there is fierce disagreement over the extent of kidnapping's role in securing captives for the Atlantic trade, one cannot ignore contemporary reports that vulnerable people became victims of individual assault and enslavement and that random raids, undertaken expressly to supply captives to the waiting Europeans, characterized certain regions and times in West Africa. One observer reported that man hunters, especially in coastal areas

lie in wait frequently in the rice-fields, to carry off all such as may be stationed there for the purpose of driving the birds from the grain. They lie in wait also at the springs of water, to which the natives resort to quench their thirst and in thickness by the sides of creeks, to [pounce] upon those solitary beings, who fish there either for amusement or for food. But their principal stations are in the long grass, by the side of the pathways, which are cut from one village to another...<sup>169</sup>

Kidnapping took place throughout West Africa but was especially common in the Niger Delta. Testifying before a Parliamentary commission investigating the slave trade in 1790, ship's surgeon Alexander Falconbridge claimed that the chief methods of procurement were "kidnapping and crimes." He recounted several instances of kidnapping in his four voyages to the coast of Africa, including the Windward and Grain

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<sup>168</sup> Oldendorp, *Histoire*, 413, 423.

<sup>169</sup> Fair Minute Book, British Library, Add Mss. 21,254, fol. 4.

Coasts, the Bight of Benin, and Angola. At Bonny, he witnessed the sale of a woman in the advanced stage of pregnancy who claimed to have been seized in the process of “returning home from a visit.” On the same voyage, Falconbridge encountered an elderly man who had been seized with his son while the two planted yams in their field.<sup>170</sup>

The instances in which Africans faced enslavement as a consequence of being found guilty of crimes also escalated during the period of the slave trade. Testifying before the slave trade commission, Ecroyde Claxton, who had served as a surgeon on board a ship that sailed along the coast of Bonny in 1788, said that people in the region were charged with “removing their Fetiches” and condemned to slavery.<sup>171</sup> In Dahomey, thieves faced sale as well. Adultery was also punishable by enslavement in some areas, and charges of adultery escalated as the Atlantic trade gained importance.<sup>172</sup>

The method of trade in captives between Europeans and Africans on the coast consisted of either a ship-born trade, in which there were no permanent posts, or the factory system, where a series of “castles” or forts were established that served both a defensive purpose and as a collection point. The areas comprising the ship-born trade in the eighteenth century included primarily Sierra Leone, Liberia, the Ivory Coast, and the Niger Delta. Trade in the Gold Coast region relied on the factory system. Established initially to safeguard shipments of gold, the forts came to serve as a place for holding

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<sup>170</sup> “Testimony of Alexander Falconbridge, 1790, Minutes on Evidence on the Slave Trade,” in *Great Britain. House of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Sheila Lambert, (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, Inc.), 72:583-83.

<sup>171</sup> Fetishes (or objects believed to have special powers) were placed along pathways and if kicked out of the way could incur a punishment of imprisonment. See “Testimony of Ecroyde Claxton, Minutes on Evidence on the Slave Trade, 1791,” *Sessional Papers*, 82:40-41.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 40. See also Ferreira Pires, *Viagem de África em o Reino de Dahomé*, ed. Clado Riberio de Lessa (São Paulo, 1957), 111.

enslaved people. The building of roughly 60 forts along the Gold Coast by a number of European trading companies established a firm European presence in the region.

## 6.8 Central African Continuities

### 6.8.1 Introduction

Although Central Africans played a less prominent role in shaping black life in British North America after the mid-seventeenth century, a continuing trade with the region brought captives to the West Indies, some of whom were, in turn, imported into New York. As the following table suggests, the overwhelming Central African origins of the first half of the seventeenth century fell to a quarter by century's end and never rose much above 40 percent throughout the eighteenth century.

**Table 6.1: Importations of Central Africans into the Americas, 1601-1800**

Years	Central Africa	Total Atlantic	% CA
1601-1650	564,700	608,800	92.8
1651-1675	88,400	223,500	39.6
1676-1700	134,100	516,300	26.0
1701-1725	256,700	956,300	26.8
1726-1750	550,400	1,303,700	42.2
1751-1775	712,000	1,901,200	37.4
1776-1800	813,900	1,906,000	42.2

Source: Joseph C. Miller, "Central Africa during the Era of the Slave Trade, c. 1490s-1850s" in *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora*, ed. Linda M. Heywood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 67.

While in the seventeenth century Portuguese and Dutch traders acquired the majority of captives from near the coast where the Africans had closer contact with Europeans, those exported during the eighteenth century were purchased in the interior

markets of Central Africa and had had less exposure to European culture. These captives came to the coastal markets along three major trade routes: across Kongo to the Mpunda region (located some two hundred miles from the Atlantic coast); east of the Kwango to Kongo ports and Luanda; and from the Benguela hinterland. The most important route, as far as the British were concerned, remained the most northerly one that tapped population sources from the Kongo, Teke, Dembos, and Loango hinterland. Some captives also came from as far away as the fertile middle Kwango valley. African traders (Vilis or *Mubires*) transported the captives to Loango Bay, Malemba, and Cabinda where British slavers were located. British ships also purchased human commodities that originated from the same middle Kwango source but who had been taken to the Portuguese controlled port of Luanda. A southern, but less important route went from central Angola, especially from the Ovimbundu polities of Mbailundu and Viye to Benguela. This region drew captives from the southeast towards the small populations of the lower Kunene.<sup>173</sup>

In the areas of Kongo, Teke, the Dembos and Angola, the conditions that had fed the trade during the seventeenth century remained. These included the regularization of the trade and the appearance of specialist traders like the Vilis and the Luso-Africans. Furthermore, the increasing reliance of Portuguese Angola on the slave trade as a source of revenues, the presence of bandits and non-attached renegades who raided undefended villages, civil wars (especially in the Kongo kingdom), and the advent of new states (particularly Lunda in the latter part of the eighteenth century) were significant factors feeding the eighteenth-century trade in enslaved people.

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<sup>173</sup> Joseph Miller, *Way of Death: The Angolan Slave Trade* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 278.

Although the Dutch and British bought enslaved people primarily at ports north of the mouth of Congo, this northern route also yielded enslaved Africans who came from south of the Loango coast. Some of them originated from southern Kongo as well as regions just north of Loango and were sold to the British at the Congo outlet at Nsulu. One of the enslaved African women that Oldendorp interviewed recalled that she came from the nation of Chamba and “knew Loango well.” In fact, her homeland was located across the Congo River, north of the province of Sundi in the kingdom of Kongo.<sup>174</sup> Moreover, small British ships operating as far south as the Dande in the region of the Kongo kingdom brought enslaved Africans who had been diverted there instead of continuing on their route to Luanda.<sup>175</sup>

The importations of West Africans and those Central Africans more distant from the coast introduced into the New York African population groups of people not only less familiar with European ways but also diverse in their own experiences. These differences influenced the ways individuals reacted to their enslavement as well as shaped their responses to each other.

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<sup>174</sup> Oldendorp, *Histoire*, 441.

<sup>175</sup> David Birmingham, *Trade and Conflict in Angola*, 139.



## **7.0 *Eighteenth-Century Procurement of Enslaved Laborers for New York***

### **7.1 *Introduction***

As labor needs escalated in the developing city during the eighteenth century, the African population in New York, enlarged by importations from the aforementioned regions, grew at a steady rate. At its height in the mid-eighteenth century, the population of New York Africans reached just over 20 percent of the city's total. After that time, it dipped slowly and fell sharply in the wake of the American Revolution (see Table 7.1).

The period of greatest importation of enslaved laborers was between 1715 and 1774, when upwards of 6,000 arrived. The trade to the city consisted of two types: a direct trade with Africa (which, although involving few ships, often comprised a sizable number of captives) and smaller shipments (rarely more than ten) from the West Indies. During the first half of the century, this latter trade supplied the greatest number of enslaved African laborers (see Table 7.2). Collectively, these imports and native born blacks helped to satisfy the needs of the bustling port city for manual laborers and of an affluent merchant class for domestics.

**Table 7.1: Population of New York County, 1698-1800**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Percent Black</b>
<b>1698</b>	4,937	700	4,237	14.2
<b>1703*</b>	4,391	799	3,592	18.2
<b>1712</b>	5,841	975	4,886	16.7
<b>1723</b>	7,248	1,362	5,886	18.8
<b>1731</b>	8,622	1,577	7,045	18.3
<b>1737</b>	10,664	1,719	8,945	16.1
<b>1746</b>	11,717	2,444	9,273	20.9
<b>1749</b>	13,249	2,368	10,926	17.9
<b>1756</b>	13,046	2,278	10,768	17.5
<b>1786</b>	26,614	2,107	21,507	7.9
<b>1790</b>	31,225	**3,092	28,133	9.9
<b>1800</b>	57,663	***5,867	51,796	10.2

Source: Thelma Foote, "Black Life in Colonial Manhattan, 1664-1786," (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1991), 78; Shane White, *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770-1810* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 26. \*The 1703 figures are taken from the census of households in New York City. \*\*Includes 1,036 free and 2,056 enslaved blacks; \*\*\*Includes 3,333 free and 2,534 enslaved blacks.

**Table 7.2: Africans Imported into New York, 1701-1765**

<b>Year</b>	<b>West Indies</b>	<b>Africa</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>West Indies</b>	<b>Africa</b>
<b>1701</b>	36		<b>1726</b>	180	
<b>1702</b>	165		<b>1727</b>		
<b>1703</b>	16		<b>1728</b>		
<b>1704</b>	8		<b>1729</b>		
<b>1705</b>		25	<b>1730</b>		
<b>1710</b>		53	<b>1731</b>		
<b>1711</b>		55	<b>1732</b>		
<b>1712</b>		77	<b>1733</b>	159	100
<b>1714</b>	53		<b>1734</b>	51	
<b>1715</b>	17	38	<b>1735-36</b>	133	
<b>1716</b>	19	43	<b>1737</b>	52	
<b>1717</b>	68	266	<b>1738-39</b>	148	
<b>1718</b>	447	70	<b>1740</b>	56	
<b>1719</b>	104		<b>1741</b>	48	
<b>1720</b>	81		<b>1742</b>	30	
<b>1721</b>	76	117	<b>1748-50</b>	13	
<b>1722</b>	106		<b>1754</b>	65	
<b>1723</b>	82		<b>1763</b>	9	103
<b>1724</b>	61		<b>1764-65</b>	35	
<b>1725</b>	54			59	

Source: *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade*, vol. 3.

## 7.2 *The Provisions Trade and the West Indian Connection*

The enslaved Africans imported into New York via the West Indies in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries arrived generally as part of the provisions trade between the islands and the city. The city's (and the colony's) early economic development depended on a union forged between farmers and merchants who provisioned the West Indies, especially in the supplying of foods. A report to the Royal Society in 1692 confirmed: "We are ye chief granary to most of ye West India

Islands.”<sup>176</sup> Towards the end of the seventeenth century, grain exports came into the city from Albany and throughout the Hudson River Valley, Connecticut, Long Island, and New Jersey. In 1705, the colony’s governor, Lord Cornbury, noted the significance of the trade relationship with the British Caribbean:

The Trade of this Province consists chiefly in flower and biskett which is sent to the Islands in the West Indians, in return they bring Rum, Sugar, Molasses, and some times pieces of Eight and Cocoa and Logwood.<sup>177</sup>

Several years later, Cadwallader Colden, a prominent New York physician, observed that

The Trade to the West Indies is wholly to the advantage of this Province the balance being every where in our favor so that we have money remitted from every place we trade with, but chiefly from Curacao and Jamaica... The Staple Commodity of the Province is Flower & Bread which is sent to all parts of the West Indies we are allowed to trade with, Besides Wheat, Pipe staves and a little Bees Wax to Madeira, We send likewise a considerable quantity of Pork, Bacon, Hogshead Staves, some Butter & a few Candles to the West Indies.<sup>178</sup>

The link between the development of North American slavery and the Caribbean economy strengthened in the eighteenth century. North American products such as lumber, livestock, and other provisions became indispensable to the maintenance of the sugar industry and the economic development of the British Caribbean colonies. Sugar production depended upon a sufficient supply of lumber for buildings and other construction as well as for fuel to boil the cane juice. Lumber was also used to make casks or hogsheads with which goods were transported to market.

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<sup>176</sup> Charles Lodwick, “New York in 1692,” *Collections*, New York Historical Society (New York: Bartle and Welford, 1848), 2:244.

<sup>177</sup> *Documentary History of the State of New York*, ed. Edmund B. O’Callaghan (Albany: Weed, Parsons and Company, 1850), 1:485.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 487.

The farmers of the middle colonies, the fishermen of New England, and the ship owners and merchants of Boston, Philadelphia, and New York all depended on the West Indian trade to fuel their commerce.<sup>179</sup> Production in the North American colonies was inextricably tied to West Indian demand. New York's exports to the West Indies consisted of bread, flour, beef and pork, hams, and a small quantity of lumber. In 1769, the value of its exports to the British West Indies amounted to approximately £66,324.<sup>180</sup> The West Indies demand for New York products is evidenced by the following table, which shows exports for a two-year period just before the American Revolution:

**Table 7.3: New York Exports to the West Indies, 1771-1773**

Articles	Quantity	1771	1712	1773
<b>Lumber</b>	ft.	88,337	538,140	739,319
<b>Shingles</b>	no.	141,700	500,813	536,257
<b>Staves</b>	no.	952,861	1,124,591	1,124,181
<b>Hoops</b>	no.	171,460	83,825	54,975
<b>Corn</b>	bus.	1,765	1,606	1,174
<b>Oats</b>	bus.	1,140	1,445	100
<b>Bread</b>	bbl.	12,855	2,969	12,819
<b>Bread</b>	kegs	452	406	360
<b>Beef, Pork</b>	bbl.	439	911	1,509
<b>Soap, Candles</b>	boxes	333	753	448

Source: Selwyn H. H. Carrington, *The British West Indies during the American Revolution*, 37. See also British Library, Add MS 12, 431, fol. 170.

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<sup>179</sup> Richard Pares, *War and Trade in the West Indies, 1739-1783* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936).

<sup>180</sup> Selwyn H.H. Carrington, *The British West Indies During the American Revolution* (Leiden: Foris, 1988).

Many of New York's provisioning ships returned from the West Indies with payments made in small parcels of Africans.<sup>181</sup> By the late 1690s, wholesale merchants Stephen DeLancey, Samuel Vetch, and Philip Schuyler were the leading exporters of wheat, rye, and Indian corn to the Caribbean. These men routinely imported enslaved laborers as a part of their return cargo.<sup>182</sup> Similarly, the Van Cortlandt mercantile family used the provisional trade as the cornerstone of a re-export business in enslaved Africans. In 1698, Jacobus Van Cortlandt complained to a West Indian agent concerning a superannuated individual that

The Negro Mingo as yet not sold shall be forced at last to sell him at a low price because of his age besides the great quantity of slaves that are come to this place this year.<sup>183</sup>

New York absorbed a significant number of enslaved laborers from the islands, mostly from the British West Indies (Jamaica, Antigua, Barbados, and Bermuda), but some came from other areas such as the Dutch island of Curaçao as well. Limited numbers were brought from the Danish island of St. Thomas, from the Dutch island of St. Eustatius, and infrequently from ports on the French island of Hispaniola. The diversity of this trade is reflected in the following table:

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<sup>181</sup> Cathy Matson, *Merchants and Empire: Trading in Colonial New York* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 202. See also the Naval Officers' Shipping Lists, 1713-1765 (microfilm).

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Jacobus Van Cortlandt Journal, August 18, 1698, Manuscript Collections, New York Historical Society.

**Table 7.4: Caribbean Islands From Which Enslaved Persons  
Were Imported Into New York, 1727-1765**

	1727	1728	1729	1730	1731	1732	1733	1734	1735- 36	1737	1738- 39	1740	1741	1742- 50	1754- 65
<b>Antigua</b>	9	9	100	50	48	13	15	2		9	20	12	7	12	34
<b>Barbados</b>	23	12	30	22	19	24	4	8			4	2			10
<b>Bermuda</b>	6	4	18	5		2	3	2	1		12	3	1	1	
<b>Curacao</b>	8	1	5	11	1	10		6	12	16			2	23	
<b>Jamaica</b>	145	86	31	39	65	31	129	25	115	16	87	22	31		
<b>Hispaniola</b>			1	7		1									
<b>Montserrat</b>		2			4										
<b>Nevis</b>					3	5		5		3					
<b>St. Kitts</b>			1	32	6			1	1	7					
<b>St. Eustatius</b>	15				1	1						11			
<b>St. Thomas</b>		9	8		7	6	2	1	4	1	4	2	1		

Source: *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade*, 3:462-511. The table does not include the following importations: Antigua & Bermuda (1); Jamaica and Bermuda (2); St. Lucia (1); St. Thomas & Jamaica (1); Jamaica & Hispaniola (1); Turks Island (1); Spanish Town and St. Thomas (18); Tortola & St. Thomas (4).

Among those Africans sold from the West Indies to New York would have been those found guilty of involvement in a revolt. Others who were considered incorrigible were sent off the islands to the mainland colonies, especially during hard economic times, where, as one planter wrote “provisions are of little value.” Planters seeking economic advantage believed that keeping them on the islands led to further indebtedness because such laborers were “not worth taxes and maintenance.”<sup>184</sup>

Perhaps other enslaved people arrived in New York in the manner presumably attempted by Torbay, a Jamaican runaway. In 1779, the enslaved man’s owner advertised for his return, stating that the sometime “fisherman, store-negro, and sailor” had been arrested for theft, but had been let go. It was suspected that Torbay had sailed to America, but his owner, Edmund Kelly, offered a reward for his apprehension anyway.<sup>185</sup> When

<sup>184</sup> See Carrington, *The Sugar Industry and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1775-1810* (Tallahassee: University Press of Florida, 2002), 261.

<sup>185</sup> *Jamaica Mercury and Kingston Weekly Advertiser*, 1779.

Torbay eluded capture, Kelly placed a second notice, this time indicating that the enslaved man used a number of aliases, including “Foot” and that he had previously attempted to pass himself off as a free man. Recognizing that runaways sometimes made their escape from the islands with the aid of mariners, Kelly offered a sizeable reward (five pounds) and warned all ships’ captains to refrain from employing him.<sup>186</sup> Although a slave-holding region, New York may have been appealing to a runaway from the islands since it allowed a certain anonymity and freedom of movement, especially during the period of the American Revolution.

The links between the American and Caribbean colonies developed and expanded as the British Empire grew into an international economy, which brought people together from different areas. By the end of the colonial period, the American trade and colonial society were fully interwoven with that of the British West Indies. Jamaican, Barbadian, and other West Indian planters had estates in the American colonies. For instance, Thomas Benson of Jamaica owned properties in Philadelphia. Similarly, the Middletons, the Bulls, and the Colletons of South Carolina had estates in Jamaica and Boston. There was considerable intermarrying among the children of West Indian and American families as well. For instance, Samuel Vaughan, a Jamaican assemblyman, married a woman from Boston. Philip Livingston, a merchant and assemblyman from Portland in Jamaica, was the eldest son of Philip Livingston, a signatory of the Declaration of Independence. He was married to a Jamaican. The Antigua merchant John Spear was the son of William Spear of Baltimore. Eliphalet and Joseph Fitch of Jamaica were formerly from Boston. Hence, there was great interchange of ideas and servants among

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid., September 4 to 11, 1779.



the colonies. West Indians sent their children to be educated in colleges in Philadelphia, New Jersey and New York.<sup>187</sup> The most famous of these was Alexander Hamilton, revolutionary leader of New York and the architect of the new nation's economic program. British colonialism had led to colonies with virtually no boundaries in regard to trade and cultural exchanges.

### 7.3 *The Direct Trade with Africa*

Using the records of the Naval Office<sup>188</sup> and advertisements in New York newspapers, James Lydon found evidence of 124 ships cleared for travel to Africa and a total of 56 arriving from the African coast between 1715 and 1774.<sup>189</sup> Faulty and incomplete records partly explain the difference between clearances and arrivals, but other factors likely prevailed as well. For instance, the insecurity of the trade, especially during the Seven Years War of 1756-63, may have caused the loss or diversion of vessels sailing between New York and Africa. In addition, more lucrative markets in the Caribbean may have drawn some shippers to deliver their cargoes there. Nevertheless, the direct to Africa voyages contributed considerably to New York's population. Lydon augmented the Naval Office lists by adding pre-1715 entries, known cases of smuggling and others whose arrival is signaled in newspapers but are not mentioned in the Naval Office lists, and an estimate of others arriving from ships that entered New York from Africa but did not leave indications of what cargo they carried. Using this material, he

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<sup>187</sup> Carrington, *The British West Indies during the American Revolution*, 130.

<sup>188</sup> The Naval Office records have been published in *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade*, vol. 3.

<sup>189</sup> James Lydon, "New York and the Slave Trade," 378.

suggested that some 6,000 Africans entered New York, of which 2,800, or 43 percent, arrived from Africa. This high percentage can be explained by the fact that Africa-bound ships brought in captives in large lots, while more numerous ships arriving from the Caribbean brought smaller numbers.

As was the case with the West Indies, the ships arriving from Africa often delivered their cargo to specific New York merchants. For instance, on July 27, 1749, the sloop *Rhode Island* dropped off 38 captives to merchant Peter Van Brugh Livingston. The following year (on September 18, 1750), the brig *Revenge* delivered 52 Africans to merchant William Beekman. Between May and August 1751, at least four ships delivered just over 100 enslaved Africans to three local merchants in New York. Peter Livingston (who had already accepted delivery of the 38 two years earlier) received more than three quarters (79) of the shipments.<sup>190</sup>

#### 7.4 *Assessing African Origins and Ethnicity*

Records of direct African imports tell us little about regional origins of enslaved people arriving in New York. Most official records list the shipper's origin as "Africa" or "Coast of Africa" or "Guinea", which, in the coastal terminology of the day, had no specific regional meaning. Even when origin is listed, it can be misleading, as was the case with the *Catherine*, which arrived in 1733, supposedly from Angola. The ship's log<sup>191</sup> shows that Angola was only the last stop on a voyage that took the vessel along the whole of the African coast. This likely explains why "Coast of Africa" appears so often

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<sup>190</sup> Manifest Books, 8-4-4, Books 24 (entry 11), 25 (entry 34), 26 (entry 55), 27(entry 5). Albany, New York State Archives (A3196).

<sup>191</sup>. Log of the *Catherine*, Ships' Log Collection, New Jersey Historical Society.

in the customs records; it confirms that there was no specific place for which most or all of the cargo originated. Such voyages were typical of the North American ventures, which generally had to accept fewer enslaved people at the Gambia, Gold Coast, or Slave Coast, where the chartered companies and non-English shippers dominated the trade from established factories. They often visited places like the Liberian coast (where the *Catherine* obtained 70 captives), the Niger Delta, or the coast of Loango that lacked permanent factories and whose African rulers accepted non-exclusive trade agreements.

Given the limitations of extant records, scholars can provide no definitive answer regarding the specific origins of enslaved Africans who arrived in New York in the eighteenth century. They can offer likely sources, however, given what they know in general about American voyages from a few surviving logbooks or other testimony. What can be surmised from these records is that the origins of captives brought to New York varied widely, reflecting the interests of the British and Americans in many different parts of Africa during this period. While there were local variations in the trade, in its main outlines, it brought in people from all parts of Africa but especially from the Gold Coast, Bight of Benin region, the Bight of Biafra, and fewer numbers from Angola. The early eighteenth century doubtless brought in many from the Gold Coast and Bight of Benin, as between them they accounted for 78 percent of the entries into Jamaica and 83 percent of those into Barbados in that period.<sup>192</sup>

Extant records suggest that more than three dozen ships brought captives to New York directly from the African coast. Of these, six listed Senegambia as their last stop,

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<sup>192</sup> See “The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM,” compiled by David Eltis, Stephen D. Behrendt, David Richardson, and Herbert Klein (Cambridge, 1999).

four mentioned the Gold Coast, and only one (the *Catherine*) specified Angola.<sup>193</sup> It is likely that the six that listed Senegambia only contained captives from that coast, for, having met their requirements, the ships turned and sailed back to New York. The four visiting the Gold Coast may well have also taken on captives in Senegambia, Sierra Leone Coast, and perhaps Cape Mount before moving on and completing their cargo. The *Catherine* as we know from its log, took on cargo at all those locations, including Angola.<sup>194</sup>

Using these indications, one can reasonably conclude that 100 percent of the 569 captives carried on ships identified by Harvard University's Du Bois Institute database that listed Senegambia as their turning point carried only Senegambians. It is also likely that one half of the 345 on ships that turned on the Gold Coast were from Senegambia and the other from the Gold Coast. And it can be assumed that one half of the 133 enslaved persons shipped from Angola were actually acquired in Senegambia, one quarter on the Gold Coast, and the last quarter in Angola itself.

Using these known ships as a proxy for the ships that do not identify African origins and augmenting the total number by the shipping discovered or estimated by Lydon, one can estimate the following figures (see Table 7.5) for the New York-based direct trade from Africa:

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Log of the *Catherine*.

**Table 7.5: Direct Trade from Africa to New York**

Region/Coast	Percent	Estimated Total
Senegambia	77	2,156
Gold Coast	20	560
Angola	3	84

Source: "The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-Rom," compiled by David Eltis et al. (Cambridge, 1999).

Although the remaining 57 percent of captives brought to New York in the eighteenth century came from the West Indies, most of them, doubtless, were born in Africa. Pricing and other considerations would have limited the ability of New York buyers to compete with the staple crop economies of the South for seasoned laborers. Hence, New Yorkers who acquired small lots of laborers from the local West Indian markets most likely purchased new arrivals. Working with this starting point, it can be assumed that the origins of the remaining people paralleled that of the English trade to the West Indies in the period, as shown in Table 7 below:

**Table 7.6: Importations to New York by Region (Via West Indies)**

Region/Coast	Percentage	Estimated Total
Senegambia/Sierra Leone	25	800
Gold Coast	14	448
Bight of Benin	9	288
Bight of Biafara	33	1056
Angola	19	608

Source: "The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-Rom," (Cambridge, 1999)

Hence, from 1701-1730, the period in which English trade was supplied by captives primarily from the Gold Coast and the Bight of Benin, the African ethnic groups arriving in New York represented a diverse mixture which included Akan speakers such as the Ashanti and other groups (who collectively were mistakenly given the name Coromantee), as well as the Ardra, Yoruba, Adja, Fon, Pop, and Gur.<sup>195</sup> Between 1740 and 1750, as English trade increased from the Bight of Biafra, the Igbo arrived in larger numbers. Finally, between 1760 and the 1770s, trade to the Ivory Coast brought in Mande people.

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<sup>195</sup> See Vivienne L. Kruger, "Born to Run: The Slave Family in Early New York, 1626 to 1827" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1985), 81-85.

***PART TWO: LIFE AND LABOR IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY NEW YORK***



**Figure 8.1: Enslaved Domestic Laborers in Eighteenth-Century New York (Illustration by Michael Colbert, 2004).**

## 8.0 *The Ubiquity of Work*

### 8.1 *Introduction*

One of the most important aspects of the African Burial Ground population is the information it provides on the manner in which Africans and African-descended people carried out daily labor. The anthropological team has uncovered a host of physical characteristics that point to possible labor practices. Among them are degenerative bone conditions such as osteoarthritis and osteophytosis (the buildup of bone around joints, which occurs usually as a function of age) and musculoskeletal stress markers such as hypertrophy (the buildup of bone where muscles attach to it). Conceding that some of these characteristics are age-related or can be prompted by nutrition or infectious diseases, their presence even among the younger members of the population suggest a causal link to occupational stress.<sup>196</sup> Such bio-mechanical stress markers point to arduous labor that involved heavy lifting, bearing substantial weight on the head or shoulders, repetitive bending of the torso or the knees, and dragging ponderous objects. A review of labor practices in Africa, the West Indies, and colonial New York suggests a range of possibilities to explain why these conditions may have been present among the African Burial Ground population.

### 8.2 *African Labor Practices*

Eighteenth-century Africans performed a variety of labor tasks in their homelands. Throughout West and West Central Africa they engaged primarily in peasant farming and

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<sup>196</sup> See “The New York African Burial Ground Skeletal Biology Final Report,” November 2004.



other agricultural pursuits. West Africans cultivated cereal grains such as millet and maize, grew peanuts, and harvested rice along the coastal areas and river valleys.<sup>197</sup> Rice cultivation was laborious, requiring hoeing and transplanting of plants as well as building dikes and other water management schemes.<sup>198</sup> The most utilized agricultural implement consisted of the short-handled hoe, a tool that caused the laborer to bend over to perform his tasks.<sup>199</sup> West Africans also raised cattle, in some areas transporting them from dryer areas to moister ones during the dry season and back. In the Senegambia region, this sort of labor was entrusted to the Fulbe, who specialized in it, but in a few places, like the Serer areas, cattle were kept penned up and managed by the farmers themselves. In this context, one might expect physical stress indicators consistent with such labor to be displayed in otherwise healthy adults.

In parts of the Senegambia region, inhabitants also worked in cloth-making industries<sup>200</sup> (as in Figure 8.2), mined gold and iron, and participated in other ferrous-related industries. Those in the Sierra Leone region labored in the logging industry, especially as the European demand for logwood and camwood grew. The Akan of the Gold Coast area also mined gold or spent considerable time clearing forests in preparation for farming. In the Bight of Benin region, fishing and boat-building occupied

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<sup>197</sup> François De Paris, "Voyage," fol. 30v; Boucard, "Relation," eds. Curtin and Boulègue, 261, 267-8.

<sup>198</sup> Rodney, *Upper Guinea Coast*, 20-25, still supplies one of the best surveys, using sources from the era.

<sup>199</sup> Chambonneau, "De l'origine des Nègres du Sénégal, coste d'Afrique, de leurs pays, religion, coutumes et moeurs," in Ritchie, "Deux textes," 320; a fine, nuanced description of agricultural labor and land use in the mid-1670s; for the 1680s in Gambia, see de Paris, "Voyage," fol. 30v, in Thilmans, "Relation," 23; for Bambuk in 1729, see Boucard, "Relation," eds. Curtin and Boulègue, 257.

<sup>200</sup> Archaeology confirms the cloth industry through the recovery of spindle whorls in many contexts throughout the region, which are dated throughout the period. See Susan Keech McIntosh (with I. Thiaw), "Tools for Understanding Transformation and Continuity in Senegambian Society: 1500-1900," in *West Africa during the Atlantic Slave Trade: Archaeological Perspectives*, ed. Christopher R. DeCorse, 26.

the attention of the coastal people, while peasant farming sustained those farther inland.



**Figure 8.2: African Woman Spinning Cloth (Illustration by Michael Colbert, 2004)**

Eighteenth-century West Central Africans also had a complex work experience. Women and girls from the Kongo region would have continued to labor at agricultural work as they had in the seventeenth century. They also extracted of salt, produced earthenware, collected the fruit that the family consumed, and spent the rest of their time engaged in child-rearing activities. Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi notes that men performed their daily tasks carrying loads on their heads or shoulders. Women, however, “fix[ed] a belt on their forehead and they carr[ied] the load extended along their back as far as their kidneys.” The process forced them to “[move] slowly with the middle of their body bent almost to the ground; [which was] even worse when they [were] nursing, since they [were] so oppressed and extended that they [could] hardly breathe.”<sup>201</sup>

Angolans, especially the Imbundus, would have been engaged in cattle rearing, as would those from Matamba. Fishing was also a major activity in the latter region. Farther east, West Central Africans would have work experiences as specialists in securing ivory, beeswax harvesting, copper and iron ore mining, and production of iron goods. As were their sisters in the Kongo and throughout West and West Central Africa, Angolan women were accustomed to agricultural labor.

In the unstable times of the eighteenth century, many men labored in war-related activities as well. The Capuchin missionary Marcellino d’Atri who passed through southern Kongo in 1702, was surprised to find the place denuded of its male population, who had all been mobilized for war or had fled to avoid being conscripted.<sup>202</sup> West

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<sup>201</sup> Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi da Montecuccolo, *Istorica Descrizione de’ tre regni Congo, Matamba ed Angola*, (Bologna, 1687), Book 1, no. 312.

<sup>202</sup> Marcellino d’Atri, “Gionate Apolitische fatte da me Fra Marcellino d’Atri...1690” [1702] in *L’anarchia congolense nel sec. XVII, La relazione inedita de Marcilino d’Atri*, ed. Carlo Torso (Genoa: Bozzi, 1984), 546-53.

Central Africans from the Portuguese *Reino de Angola*, the Dembos and other Kimbundu-speaking regions would have had considerable experience in the *guerra preta*. Also involved in war-related activities were porters who transported military hardware and other supplies (guns, gun powder, provisions, cloths, and the like) for the Portuguese army. Still others worked in labor gangs on Portuguese owned *arimos* (plantations) that were spread along the Bengo and Dande Rivers.<sup>203</sup>

In the lesser known states such as Soso, Hungu, and Holo (which only appeared in the records in the eighteenth century as suppliers), warfare also shaped the labor experiences of men. For example, wars such as the one in 1709 between Matamba and Kahenda, Portugal's leading vassal and strongest supporter in the region, would have occupied the attention of many as would have the war that occurred in 1739 when Holo, a former province of Matamba that was located to its north, declared its independence.<sup>204</sup> Skirmishes and instability along the Portuguese frontier that involved local troops from Portuguese Ambaca and Matamba in 1755 would have sent into the Atlantic men who had experience as soldiers. Manoel Correia Leitão reported for Kasanje that the number of men under arms there and its vassal states was more than 200,000.<sup>205</sup>

### 8.3 *West Indian Labor Practices in the Eighteenth Century*

The degree to which Africans destined for colonial New York may have experienced bio-mechanical stress in the West Indies depended on the period of time they

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<sup>203</sup> For the eighteenth century commercial environment of West Central Africa see Joseph Miller, *Way of Death*, especially chapters 6 – 9.

<sup>204</sup> Alexandre Elias da Silva Correia, *Historia D'Angola* 2 vols. (Lisbon, 1937), 2: 335; and Birmingham, *Trade and Conquest*, 142-43.

<sup>205</sup> Correia Leitão, "Viagem," fol. 9, Sebasteyén and Vansina, "Manoel Correia Leitão," 340-41.

labored there. Some would have been in the islands for mere days before being transshipped to New York, but others may have spent months, if not years there, finally suffering sale as superannuated laborers unfit for plantation work. The physical effects of arduous labor would have been exhibited in the remains uncovered in the burial ground.

Africans were brought to the West Indies primarily to perform agricultural labor on sugar plantations. One of the most exploitative labor systems in existence, sugar cultivation followed a physically exhausting and dangerous routine (see Figure 8.3).<sup>206</sup> Field hands worked from sunrise to sunset, with a one-half hour break in the mornings, followed, in some instances, by a two-hour break that included cane hole digging. Individuals were required to dig, on average, 120 holes (roughly four feet square and two feet deep) in a day on previously ploughed lands and 90 in unploughed fields.<sup>207</sup> Once they dug the holes, enslaved workers (including children), spread the heaps with manure from 80-pound baskets, which they carried on their heads. Young women who belonged to the “trash gang” usually carried heavy baskets from the mill and were required to stoop frequently.<sup>208</sup> Laborers assigned the task of cutting grass for the estate animals

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<sup>206</sup> See “A List of Slaves on Appleton Estate January 1, 1819,” Dickinson MSS, Somerset Record Office, England. An entry for that year notes that “Johanna, died her body being partly ground in the mill.”

<sup>207</sup> Barry Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean 1807-1834* (University of the West Indies, Mona: Canoe Press, 1995), 164.

<sup>208</sup> Carrington, *The Sugar Industry and the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, chapter 6.



**Figure 8.3: Women Laboring in the Cane Fields (Illustration by Michael Colbert, 2004).**

bundled the grass into 100-pound bales and transported it on their heads.<sup>209</sup> Excessive labor combined with maltreatment, poor diet, and diseases to produce high mortality among enslaved people. The enslaved population which undertook the heavy manual tasks suffered the greatest disabilities. The worst of these disabilities occurred during crop time when the majority of the population worked continuously, sometimes without

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid. See also Richard B. Sheridan, “Why the Condition of the Slaves was ‘Less Intolerable’ in Barbados than in the other Sugar Colonies,” in *Inside Slavery: Process and Legacy in the Caribbean Experience*, ed. Hilary Beckles (The University of the West Indies, Mona: Canoe Press, 1996), 38-39.

sleep, for an entire day.

#### 8.4 *“Fit for Town or Country”: The New York Labor Experience*

##### 8.4.1 *Introduction*

Eighteenth-century New York Africans knew a city vastly different from the one familiar to the founding generations of the 1600s. Population increase and economic growth had transformed the settlement from one possessing a distinctly rural character, whose few hundred inhabitants were concentrated at the tip of Manhattan Island, to a city several thousand strong that had crept steadily northward and westward. African labor grew increasingly valuable in the urban environment into which New York was evolving in the eighteenth century. Black people continued to perform the tasks demanded of them during the earlier century and had additionally thrust upon them the new chores necessitated by an economy in transition (see Table 8.1).

When considering the labor of African people in the eighteenth century, one is immediately struck by the diversity of work tasks they performed. For instance, Mary Dunn owned “two very good Negro Men Slaves Taylors, and one Negro Man Slave, a Butcher and Sawyer...” whom she offered for sale when her husband, tailor John Dunn, died.<sup>210</sup> Benjamin D’Harriette owned 22 year old Scipio whom he employed as a cooper,<sup>211</sup> while Francis Vincent, a sail-maker who died in 1733, left property in the form

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<sup>210</sup> New York *Gazette*, August 10 – 17, 1730.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, September 14-21, 1730.

**Table 8.1: Distribution of Blacks in New York City Households  
by Occupation of Household Head, 1703**

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Number of Households</b>	<b>Black Males (over 16)</b>	<b>Black Females (over 16)</b>	<b>Black Male Children</b>	<b>Black Female Children</b>	<b>Total Blacks</b>
Merchant	50	49	57	19	20	145
Ship's master	17	11	17	7	5	40
Bolter	7	14	5	3	0	22
Brewer	3	8	4	5	1	18
Gentleman	8	6	10	1	0	17
Cordwainer	10	7	5	1	2	15
Victualler	6	4	4	3	4	15
Baker	10	6	4	3	1	14
Cooper	7	7	4	1	0	12
Mariner	7	4	5	1	1	11
Carpenter	3	4	3	2	0	9
Bricklayer	3	3	3	3	0	9
Attorney	3	1	4	1	2	8
Blacksmith	3	2	1	2	1	6
Goldsmith	2	0	2	2	1	5
Sailmaker	2	1	3	1	0	5
Painter	1	1	1	1	1	4
Shipwright	2	2	1	0	1	4
Chirurgion	3	0	1	0	2	3
Blockmaker	1	0	1	1	0	2
Printer	1	0	2	0	0	2
Shopkeeper	1	0	2	0	0	2
Butcher	2	2	0	0	0	2
Yeoman	1	1	1	0	0	2
Boatman	1	0	0	1	0	1
Weaver	1	0	1	0	0	1
Tailor	1	0	1	0	0	1
Barber	1	0	1	0	0	1
Glazier	1	1	0	0	0	1
Silversmith	1	0	0	0	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>134</b>	<b>143</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>378</b>

Source: Nan Rothschild, *New York Neighborhoods: The Eighteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1990), Appendix 1: 1703 Census. Rothschild compiled data on a total of 718 household heads based on Archdeacon (1971) and a 1703/4 tax assessment. Heads of Households which included blacks (from the census) were identified in the Rothschild/Archdeacon list to obtain occupation. The Out Ward was not included in the Rothschild/Archdeacon list nor were female-headed households.



of “two young Negro Men, both good Sail-makers.”<sup>212</sup> Jacobus van Cortlandt held Andrew Saxton to labor as a carpenter and cooper. When Saxton absconded in 1733, he took his “Tools for both Trades” with him.<sup>213</sup> As these examples suggest, enslaved people were owned by merchants who kept them at labor in their mercantile houses and small shops; they worked for professionals such as attorneys and physicians and for a variety of artisans, including ropemakers, carpenters, blacksmiths, shipwrights, and coachmakers.<sup>214</sup> People of African descent labored as farm hands and mariners, domestics and dock workers, bakers and brewers, tanners and millers, chimney sweeps and washerwomen, street vendors and goldsmiths (see Map 8.1). Individual laborers often performed equally varied tasks. In the morning one might be employed at sawing wood or “cutting away the ice out of the yard” and in the afternoon at fashioning parts for a sloop.<sup>215</sup> In describing the multifaceted nature of black labor in colonial New York, Ira Berlin has indicated that enslaved people could be employed in agriculture one day and in a variety of urban-based tasks the next.<sup>216</sup> The relative ease with which New York Africans moved between town and country was a consequence of slave-owning family ties between the two regions, the propensity for city merchants to acquire country estates, and the practice of hiring out underutilized laborers.

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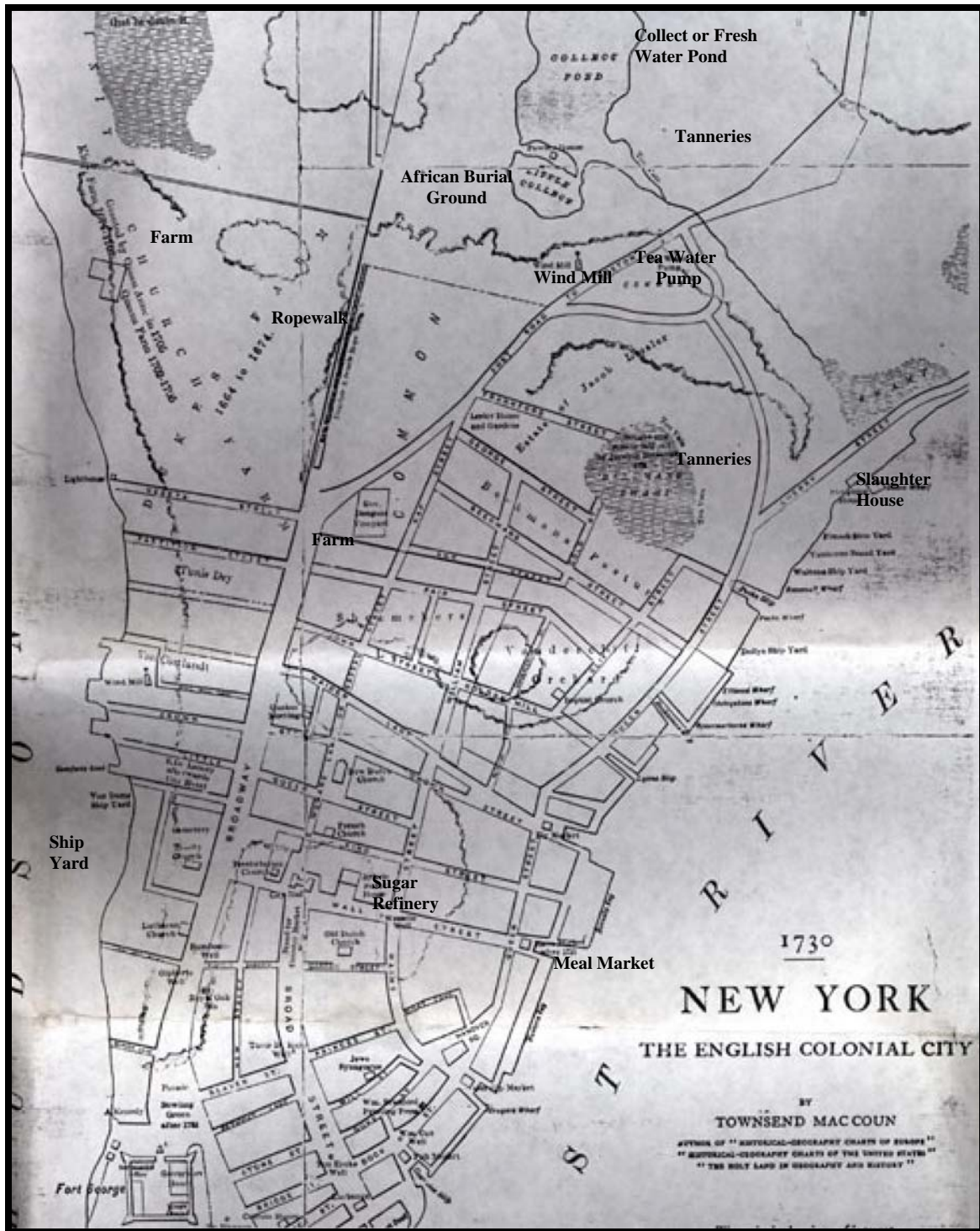
<sup>212</sup> New York *Gazette*, April 9-16, 1733.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, August 27-September 3, 1733.

<sup>214</sup> Kruger, “Born to Run,” 93.

<sup>215</sup> See Daniel Horsmanden, *The New York Conspiracy*, edited with an Introduction by Thomas J. Davis (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 34.

<sup>216</sup> Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 56.



Map 7.8: Labor Sites in Colonial New York (adapted from the Maccoun Map)

#### 8.4.2 “Fit for Country Business”

Although the eighteenth century witnessed the transformation from village to

town, certain sections of New York remained more reminiscent of the countryside. Numerous farms remained in place in or near the town during this period, and Africans in the vicinity continued to serve as an important labor force in this regard. Cultivated lands were located west of Broadway and the upper reaches of Manhattan, including Haarlem. A description of this area in the 1720s judged it as consisting of little more than enslaved laborers and fields.<sup>217</sup> John Messeroll, the owner of a farm at Turtle Bay (34<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan) and Nicholas Bayard, a merchant with farm property in the Out Ward, doubtless kept some (if not all) of the five enslaved Africans each held employed in agriculture. Advertisements in New York newspapers frequently offered for sale laborers “fit for country Business”<sup>218</sup> or sought the labor of experienced ploughmen.

During the winter months, men ordinarily engaged in farm work were used to lay up a supply of timber for eventual export to shippers in the West Indies or for local use by merchants. At other times, New York Africans on the farms engaged in trades such as coopering and cordwaining. Hiring out was also an option preferred by New York farmers determined to keep their enslaved laborers fully employed during the winter months and after harvest.

With greater diversification of crops, work tasks that formerly fell within the domain of black men likely passed to enslaved women. Adult women and girls from at least twelve years of age were considered able-bodied enough to perform numerous outdoor as well as indoor tasks related to farming. Historical data from other colonies

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<sup>217</sup> Cited in Nan Rothschild, *New York Neighborhoods: The Eighteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1990), 13.

<sup>218</sup> *New York Gazette*, February 8-15, 1731.

provide some insight into possible practices of black women agricultural workers in New York. In Virginia, for instance, Lois Carr and Lorena Walsh have found that women in the eighteenth century labored at the traditional tasks of hoeing and weeding. But they acquired new jobs as well, such as cleaning stables and spreading manure, grubbing swamps, and building fences.<sup>219</sup> These work tasks approximated the labor intensive plantation experiences of many men and women transported from the West Indies. It should be noted, however, that most women (and superannuated men) who arrived in New York after having labored in the West Indies would likely have been engaged in domestic work rather than in agriculture.

#### 8.4.3 *Unskilled Urban-based Labor*

The majority of New York Africans were kept busy in various unskilled tasks such as loading and unloading the numerous ships that entered and departed this bustling port city. Black men performed the most physically demanding labor that shipping required, including the handling of heavy hogsheads that were routinely used to store goods (see Figure 8.4). Whether they hoisted them from the vessels with the use of a block and tackle or rolled them into place, the labor was back-breaking and dangerous.

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<sup>219</sup> Lois Carr and Lorena Walsh, "Economic Diversification and Labor Organization in the Chesapeake, 1650-1820," in *Work and Labor in Early America*, ed. Stephen Innes (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 177.



**Figure 8.4: New York Africans loading ships, a key feature of work as New York became an important port town. (Illustration by Michael Colbert, 2004).**

Contrary to laws intended to limit the use of black men as porters, getting the merchandise to and from the docks fell to enslaved men as well. Many of the wealthiest merchants used their enslaved laborers to haul goods between the ships and the warehouses that sprang up along the East River.<sup>220</sup> Others who owned no laborers satisfied their need by hiring workers for the day or for longer terms.

#### 8.4.4 *The Use of African Labor in Manufacturing*

Although primarily an unskilled class of workers, Africans and their descendents also provided more skilled support in manufacturing. Eighteenth-century New York supported a number of manufacturing concerns that utilized black labor. Nicholas Bayard employed such laborers in his sugar refinery. Despite laws to the contrary, New York Africans worked alongside their owners in shipbuilding and related industries, in coopering and other types of woodworking, in tanning, brewing, and in cloth-making.

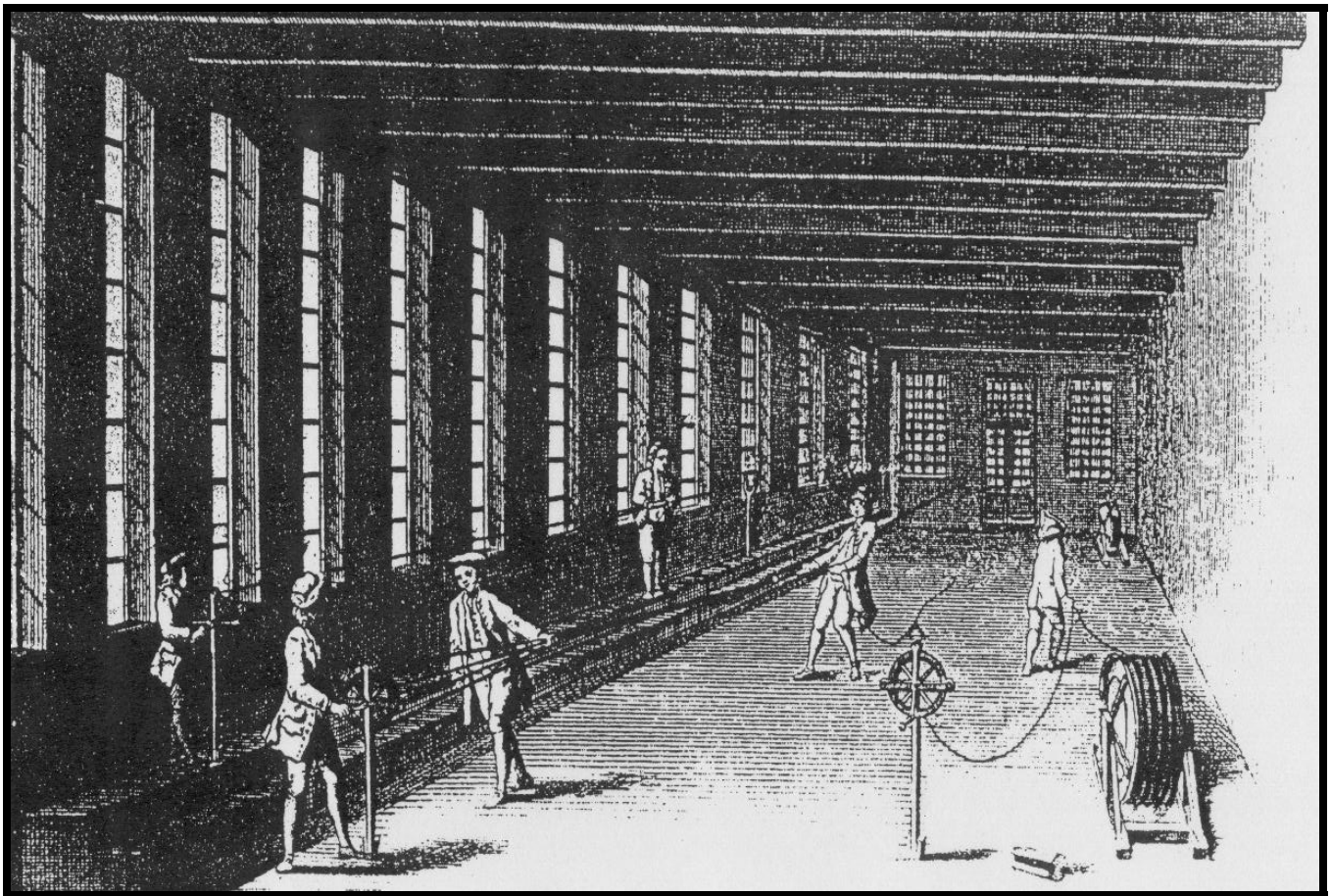
New York's commercial interests stimulated the growth of shipbuilding in the colonial city, and, as a consequence, enslaved Africans were employed in a wide range of tasks that supported the industry, especially in repairing and caulking. The building of a ship took roughly one year, and shipwrights and their assistants used a variety of tools such as the broadax, whipsaw, pod auger, plane, chisel, and adz to perform their work. Black men who assisted in shipbuilding likely handled the timbers and planking, which were generally carried on the shoulders of the workmen.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Thelma Foote, "Black Life in Colonial Manhattan, 108. See also Thomas Archdeacon, *New York City, 1664-1710: Conquest and Change* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1976), 89-90.

<sup>221</sup> Carl Bridenbaugh, *The Colonial Craftsman* (New York: New York University Press, 1950).

Ropewalks, a related industry, employed black laborers in the making of cordage (ropes and cables) for ship's rigging (see Figure 8.5). Runaway and sales advertisements in city newspapers make mention of black men “bred to the ropemaking business.”<sup>222</sup> One of the alleged conspirators in the 1741 “Negro plot” to burn the city and kill the



**Figure 8.5: Ropewalk, a Colonial Industry where Enslaved Laborers Worked (from Carl Bridenbaugh, *The Colonial Craftsman*, 1950).**

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<sup>222</sup> *Daily Advertiser*, September 7, 1801 and November 13, 1774; *Argus*, September 24, 1795; *American Minerva*, May 26, 1796.

white inhabitants testified that he was returning home from his owner's rope-walk when he encountered some of the co-conspirators.<sup>223</sup>

Goods transported on ships or needing long-term storage generally were placed in huge barrels that often could accommodate several hundred pounds. New York's extensive shipping industry required that such containers be plentiful. As such, many free and enslaved African men were employed at coopering. Those Africans who worked in this capacity would have been exposed to other woodworking trades such as joinery, woodturning, carving, coffin-making, and cabinetmaking as well.<sup>224</sup> However, their participation was challenged by white men who felt threatened by the competition black coopers posed. Such concern led a group of white men to petition the Assembly in 1743, complaining

...that several merchants...employ great numbers of Negroes in that occupation, not only to supply their own occasions with casks, but likewise sell and dispose to others; and pray such relief in the premises as shall be thought just and reasonable.<sup>225</sup>

White men showed less concern for a black presence in certain other, more unpleasant manufactures. Slaughterhouses, tanneries, and other establishments that processed non-food animal remains had been established in New York at an early date. Considered a "heavy craft," city tanneries, for instance, employed many African men.<sup>226</sup> Among the tanners and merchants involved with the industry who held Africans were

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<sup>223</sup> See Horsmanden, *The New York Conspiracy*, 192.

<sup>224</sup> Bridenbaugh, *The Colonial Craftsman*, 75.

<sup>225</sup> Parish Transcripts, (Colonial State Papers) of America and the West Indies, Manuscript, New York Historical Society.

<sup>226</sup> Shane White, *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770-1810*. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press), 1991, 11.



prominent New Yorkers such as Joseph Waldron, John Livingston, George Shaw, Albert Polhemus, and Daniel Tooker.

Tanning was a long, tedious process that began with the acquisition and drying of hides. The hides were then placed in vats of lye for ease of hair removal. For several months they were soaked in a liquid made from black-oak bark, which had been crushed or ground in mills.<sup>227</sup> The final stage in the process involved scraping and softening the hides with bear's oil. Once the hides had been processed, they were used to make shoes, boots, harnesses, and other leather goods.

Because of their noxious fumes and generally disagreeable characteristics, slaughterhouses and tanneries were located on the periphery of the city. Some of these establishments were centered around the Collect Pond (near the African Burial Ground). Tanneries and related industries continued to operate on the city's periphery well into the eighteenth century.<sup>228</sup>

Colonial New York also participated in the tobacco industry; but as Virginia and Maryland continued to dominate the growing of the crop, New York chose to pursue the manufacture of snuff. Made by grinding and flavoring dried tobacco leaf, snuff enjoyed extraordinary popularity as an industry between 1720 and 1734.<sup>229</sup> Hogsheads of tobacco weighing as much as 1,000 pounds were imported to New York by 1715 for conversion

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<sup>227</sup> Victor S. Clark. *The History of Manufactures in the United States* (New York: Peter Smith, 1949), 1:167.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Michael Kammen, *Colonial New York: A History*. (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1975). See chapter "Economic Growth and Problems of Intergroup Relations."

into chewing tobacco and snuff.<sup>230</sup> Black and white women did the stemming and flavoring, while males did lump making and pressing.

In 1760 Peter Lorillard and John Van Cortlandt, who both held enslaved Africans, expanded snuff manufacturing in the city. Van Cortlandt also entered into partnership with several others to run a small snuff manufactory by the mid-1760s. One of the partners, Frederic Lentz supplied black and white labor for the industry.<sup>231</sup>

Cider, related products (cider-brandy, cider-wine, etc.) and whiskey were among the earliest forms of manufacture in New York, dating back to the Dutch period. These beverages were made primarily for household consumption, and women and girls learned how to brew as part of their household duties (see section 8.4.5 below).<sup>232</sup> Although production for domestic consumption continued under British rule, the lure of the export market spurred alcohol production.

In the early eighteenth century, the Beekmans, Bayards, van Cortlandts, Kips, and Rutgers were among several merchant families who brewed beer for public consumption. By 1768 at least seventeen merchants were operating distilleries in the city. One of them owned a ninety-gallon still and doubtless employed enslaved labor to work it.<sup>233</sup> When the brewer Harmanus Rutger died in 1753, his will providing for the disposal

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<sup>230</sup> Matson, *Merchants and Empire*, 262.

<sup>231</sup> Howard Rock, *The New York City Artisan, 1789-1825: A Documentary History* (New York: State University Press, 1989), 67.

<sup>232</sup> Matson, *Merchants and Empire*, 261.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

of his enslaved laborers, stipulated that his grandson be given the choice of “the best of my negroes skilled in the brewing trade.”<sup>234</sup>

Enslaved Africans were also held by gold and silversmiths. In August 1756, goldsmith Thomas Hammersley advertised for the return of his “negro fellow,” Duke, who had runaway 10 days before. Eight years later, the unlucky goldsmith found himself similarly indisposed when a second black servant took his leave as well.<sup>235</sup> Although the records are silent on whether these men were put to work in this industry, we do know that Africans were arriving from areas of the continent where knowledge of goldsmithing existed.

#### 8.4.5 *The Drudgery of Women's Work*

While scanning the April 15, 1734, issue of the *New York Weekly Journal*, readers would have come upon the following advertisement:

To be Sold, a young Negro Woman, about 20 Years old, she does all sorts of House work; she can brew, Bake, boyle soast Soap, Wash, Iron & Starch, and is a good darey Woman. She can Card and Spin at the great Wheel, Cotton, Lennen and Wollen, she has another good Property she neither drinks Rum nor smoaks Tobacco, and she is a strong hale healthy Wench, she can cook pretty well for Rost and Boyld; she can speak no other Language but English; she had the small Pox in Barbados when a Child...<sup>236</sup>

As the advertisement suggests, black women’s labor sustained rural economies as well as urban ones. Although they could be found in the fields, for the most part, they endured

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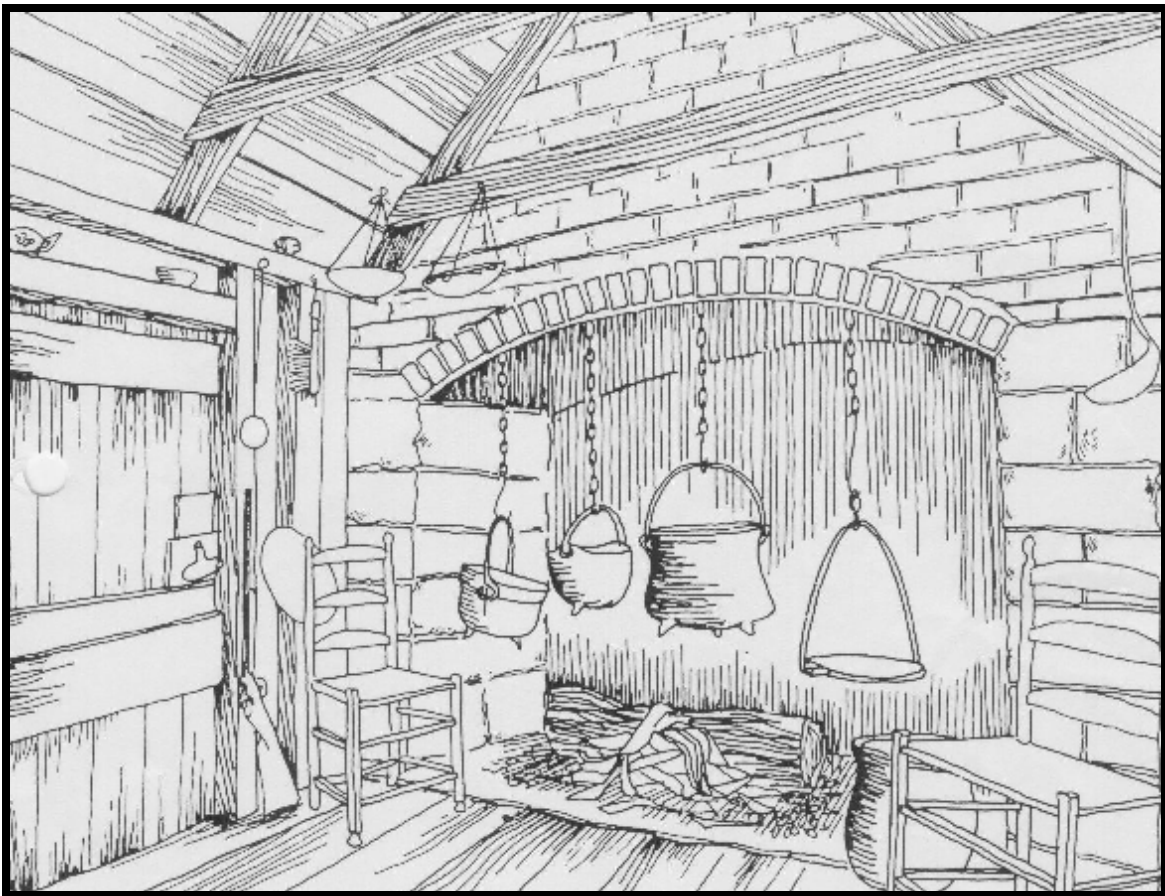
<sup>234</sup> See Abstract of Wills, on File in the Surrogates Office, City of New York, *Collections*, New York Historical Society, 14 vols., Will of Harmanus Rutger, vol. 4, August, 1753.

<sup>235</sup> Rita S. Gottesman, *The Arts and Crafts in New York, 1726-1776* (New York: DeCapo Press, 1970), 48.

<sup>236</sup> *New York Weekly Journal*, April 15, 1734.

the drudgery that was typical of domestic labor in the eighteenth century. Enslaved women's daily chores often began before dawn and included preserving and cooking food, caring for children, cleaning house and laundering clothes, as well as spinning, weaving, sewing, and brewing alcoholic beverages. Their chores also included pumping and carrying water to meet household needs for drinking, eating, bathing, and cleaning.

Cooking was an especially burdensome task for enslaved Africans, particularly women. Often prepared in a detached "Negro kitchen"—typically found in the homes of wealthy merchants (see Figure 8.6)—food was cooked in large cast iron pots.



**Figure 8.6: "Negro Kitchen" common in colonial households. African families often resided in or near this area of the household (from Esther Singleton, *Dutch New York*, 1909)**

When filled with food contents (including several gallons of liquid), these pots increased the burden of lifting that women endured throughout the day.

African women's labor also was exploited in the making of clothing from wool, linen, and cotton. Eighteenth-century New Yorkers used looms and spinning wheels extensively; teaching a young girl to spin—whether enslaved or free—was an important part of her education. In 1711, one of the directives left by Joseph Baker, a New York City mariner, was "to take especial care of my Negro girl named Elizabeth, free born in my house May 20, 1706." Baker stipulated that "at or before [Elizabeth] is eleven years of age she is to be taught to read English, good housewifery, and to sew, knit and spin linen and woolen well." <sup>237</sup>

The nature of certain types of woven fabrics increased the physical exertion of the women who worked with such materials. Some of these fabrics lacked flexibility and were unsuitable for wearing unless softened or fulled. In such instances, the cloth was saturated with warm water and soap, and pounded with mallets, sticks, or one's feet. <sup>238</sup> Once rendered supple, cloths could be dyed using products such as the barks of certain woods or by using indigo. <sup>239</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> See Abstracts of Wills on File in the Surrogates Office, City of New York, vol. 2 (1708-1728), 75, *Collections*, New York Historical Society. Baker also stipulated that Elizabeth was to be allowed to live as a "white Christian" (which meant, presumably, that she would be entitled to certain privileges denied to other blacks) and receive three shillings a week during her lifetime.

<sup>238</sup> For a discussion of the fulling process, see Rolla Milton Tryon, *Household Manufactures in the United States, 1640-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1917), 210.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, 211-12.

#### 8.4.6 Child Labor

In December 1721, Cadwallader Colden sought to purchase three or four enslaved laborers. Two of them, he advised, should be black men approximately eighteen years of age; the third must be a black girl of about thirteen, whom his wife “designes...Chiefly to keep the children & to sow.”<sup>240</sup> Forty years later, John Watts, prominent New York merchant and councilor, would observe: “For this market, [enslaved laborers] must be young, the younger the better if not quite children, those advanced in years will never do...”<sup>241</sup> Watts’ statement reflected recognition of the growing need New Yorkers had for domestic labor and their preference for compliant workers. Newspaper announcements of the arrival of “a parcel of likely negro boys and girls from nine to twelve years of age” or “a parcel of young slaves from the coast of Africa” were common in the second half of the eighteenth century.<sup>242</sup> Children were recognized for their value as laborers at an early age; hence, advertisements offered for sale or sought the acquisition of those as young as six years old. Vivienne Kruger has found that there was brisk buying and selling of enslaved children between the ages of six and twelve, when prices were still low.<sup>243</sup> Younger children rarely suffered separation from a care-giving parent, since they required attention and could not perform sufficient labor to justify the cost of their upkeep.

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<sup>240</sup> The Letters and Papers of Cadwallader Colden, 1711-1775, 9 vols., *Collections*, New York Historical Society, 1917-35, 1:51.

<sup>241</sup> Letter Book of John Watts: Merchant and Councillor of New York, January 1, 1762-December 22, 1765, *Collections*, New York Historical Society, 1928, March 30, 1762, 31.

<sup>242</sup> See New York *Mercury*, June 16, 1760.

<sup>243</sup> See New York *Journal and Patriotic Register*, November 30, 1792 and July 25, 1792; New York *Daily Advertiser*, January 30, 1792; New York *Chronicle*, December 21, 1769. See also Vivienne Kruger, “Born to Run.”

Children in the six to twelve years old age group were often used to do housework and “attend at table” or engage in any labor the owner desired. Some of them, as the following advertisement suggests, began training in special skills at this early age as well: “A VERY Likely Negro Girl to be Sold, brought up here in Town, Speaks very good English, aged about Ten years, has had the Small-pox and Measels, and begins to handle her Needle.”<sup>244</sup>

Children may have been exposed to more strenuous types of labor in colonial New York. Doubtless, those who belonged to merchants and shopkeepers were as likely to work in their warehouses and business establishments as they were in their households. Where men may have been preferable for certain heavy work, New Yorkers would have had to rely on whatever labor was available to them, including that supplied by women and children.<sup>245</sup>

#### 8.4.6 *Independent Economies among African peoples*

Although compelled to labor for their owners, some enslaved Africans found time and ways to engage in economic activity on their own account. The “internal economies” that developed among them helped to mitigate the deficiencies they suffered under slavery and surely provided psychological satisfaction as well. Africans who vended for their owners had ample opportunity, but presumably not permission, to sell a few of their own goods. The sale of independently grown crops and livestock, wild foods acquired

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<sup>244</sup> New York *Gazette*, October 8 to 15, 1733.

<sup>245</sup> Data compiled from the African Burial Ground population point to certain biomechanical stress markers on the remains of adults that are indicative of hard labor. As Blakey and Rankin-Hill point out, however, children are not good candidates for such study because of the constant bone remodeling that is related to natural growth. See Blakey, Rankin-Hill et al., “The New York African Burial Ground Skeletal Biology Final Report,” November 2004.

from hunting and gathering, and crafts work (to say nothing of pilfered items) enabled enslaved workers to enhance their level of subsistence and earn money or other goods.

New Yorkers hastened to pass laws that sought to prohibit enslaved laborers from engaging in such independent economic activity. In 1684, for instance, the colony stipulated that no servant or enslaved person could “give sell or truck any comodity whatsoever during ye time of their service,” and no free person could extend credit to servants or slaves for “clothes drinke or any other comodity.”<sup>246</sup> A 1702 law forbade New Yorkers to “Trade with any slave either in buying or selling, without leave and Consent of the Master or Mistress.” The law fined the offender five pounds and three times the value of the item involved.<sup>247</sup> Hence, when the wife of Otto Garrison was convicted for purchasing soap from an enslaved person, she was forced to pay five pounds and eighteen shillings.<sup>248</sup> Yet another law in 1715 denied enslaved people the opportunity to sell oysters, thus protecting whites from competition while restricting the ability of blacks to gain economic independence.<sup>249</sup>

Interestingly, shortly before the 1741 “conspiracy” that so alarmed New York whites, the Common Council passed a law that prohibited “Negroes and other Slaves” from selling certain produce in the city. The council’s motivation for such action was reflected in the statement that

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<sup>246</sup> See *Colonial Laws of New York from 1664 to the Revolution* (Albany: J.B. Lyons, 1684), 1:157.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, I:761-767.

<sup>248</sup> *MCC*, 1:232. This was strengthened by a measure passed in 1730 which forbade New Yorkers to “sell rum or other strong Liquor to any Negro Indian or Mulato Slave or Slaves or shall buy or take in pawn from them any wares Merchandises apparel Tools Instruments or any other Kind of goods whatever...” See *Col Laws* 2:679-688 (October, 1730).

<sup>249</sup> *Colonial Laws of New York*, 1:845.



[O]f Late Years great Numbers of Negros Indians and Molatto Slaves have Made it a common Practice of Buying, Selling and Exposing to Sale, not Only in houses, out houses yards but Likewise in the Publick Streets Within this City, great Quantities of Boiled Indian Corn, Pears, Peaches, Apples and other kind of fruit which pernicious practice is not only Detrimental to the Masters Mistresses and Owners of Such Slaves in Regard they Absent themselves from their Service: But is also productive of Encreasing if not Occasioning many and Dangerous fevours and other distempers & Diseases in the Inhabitants in the same city.<sup>250</sup>

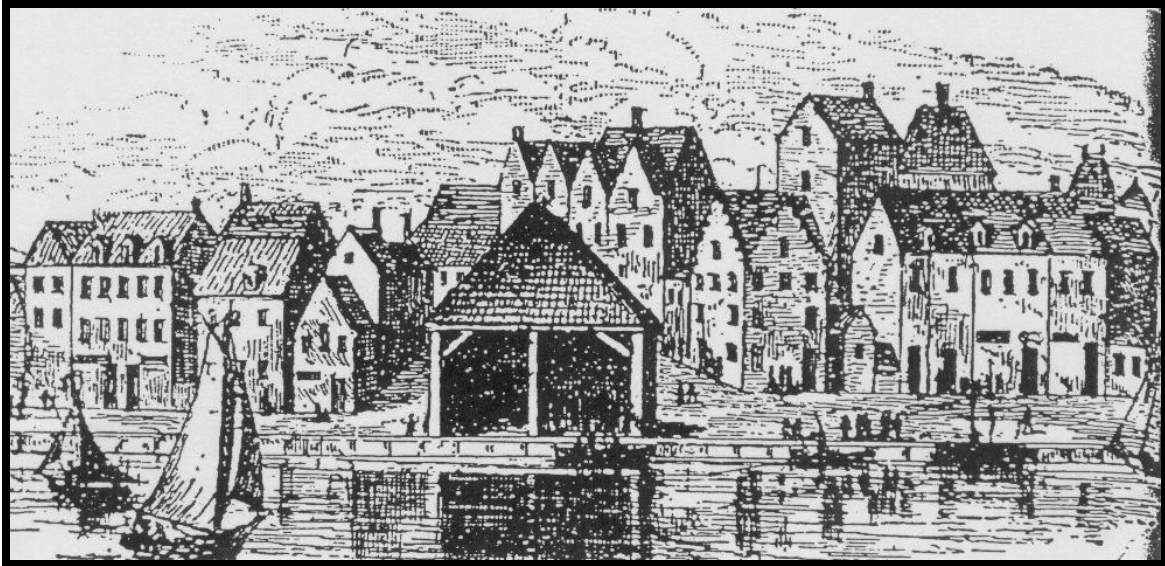
The law exempted vendors from the out ward or outside of the town who had their owners' permission to sell goods. New York bondsmen and women were forbidden to sell these goods, perhaps, because they had successfully established an informal economy that inured to their own benefit rather than that of their owners.

The absenteeism and inattentiveness of certain owners and the idleness or abundance of unclaimed time that some enslaved people enjoyed also placed them in a position to hire themselves out to those seeking labor. In an effort to regulate this activity, the Common Council enacted a measure in 1711 that designated a specific place—the Market House at the Wall Street slip—where enslaved laborers could “take up their standing” for purposes of hire (see Figure 8.7).<sup>251</sup> In so doing, the council limited the ability of bondsmen to earn money without the knowledge or consent of their owners.

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<sup>250</sup> *MCC* 4:497-8 (August 1740).

<sup>251</sup> *MCC* 2:458 (November 1711).



**Figure 8.7: The Market House, Site of Hiring and Sale of Enslaved Africans (from David Bruce, *The Empire State in Three Centuries*, 1898.)**

New Yorkers recognized that independent economic activity on the part of enslaved laborers threatened to undermine the foundation on which their system of bondage was based. The very nature of the society, however—with its anonymity and the willingness of many whites to overlook these victimless crimes (especially if they were benefiting monetarily themselves), the mobility of its servile labor force, and the opportunity for bondsmen and women to acquire items for sale (either by illegal or legal means)—ensured that these internal economies would survive.

## 9.0 *Social Characteristics and Cultural Practices of Africans in Eighteenth-Century New York*

### 9.1 *Introduction*

In May 1731, New York merchant Enoch Stephenson placed the following simple, one-sentence announcement in the city's *Gazette*: "A Parcel of choice Negro Men and Women to be Sold."<sup>252</sup> The advertisement likely raised hardly an eyebrow, as such items were commonplace in the eighteenth century. But while it cavalierly consigned black men and women to the position of property, enslaved New York Africans pressed to create a life for themselves that defied their servile legal status. The continuous influx of African-born people influenced the worldview of New York's black population, and the traditions they brought with them helped to shape new institutions and permitted them to cope with the issues they faced while in bondage.

### 9.2 *Eighteenth-Century Social and Cultural Origins*

#### 9.2.1 *The African Background*

The Africans transported to New York had lived in communities based on kinship and village loyalties and had enjoyed expanded connections through inter-village exchange and marriage. Beyond these groupings were cross-cutting social institutions that controlled a great deal of local and, to some extent, regional social life. In the Senegambia, many of these institutions had religious overtones. Certain Islamic groups comprised students who had studied under the same master and developed solidarities as a consequence. Traditional religious customs consisted of extra-family and region groups that were based on occupation. In some instances, caste groups formed around

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<sup>252</sup> New York *Gazette* (May 17 to 24, 1731).

occupational specialties that intermarried and recognized solidarity based on those unions. In other instances, occupational groups expanded beyond their original intention. An example is the *ton*, a hunters' association in Bamana country. According to tradition, the Bamana empire of Segou was founded in 1712 by Biton Kulibali, who acquired his first supporters and army in the hunters' association. This association was quickly expanded from an occupational group to both a military and political one.<sup>253</sup> Clearly, the principles of such a group could be expanded in other contexts to additional uses as well.

In the Sierra Leone-Liberia region, the most important cross-cutting social institutions were groups, such as the Poro Society, dominated by the political elite. Thomas Winterbottom and John Matthews, who observed the society in the 1780s and 1790s thought it was a secret organization of men only (women had a separate society), for all were sworn to an oath of secrecy about its inner workings, which enforced order and particularly punished crimes such as murder or adultery.<sup>254</sup> That these institutions might be modified and extended in the environment of the Americas is suggested by Margaret Washington's contention that the independent churches of the Gullah or Sea Islands were in some ways modeled on and influenced by the Poro and Sande (women's)

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<sup>253</sup> See, among others, the version based on oral and documentary sources, in Djata, *Bamana Empire*, 9-25.

<sup>254</sup> John Matthews, *Voyage*, 82-4; Thomas Winterbottom, *Account*, 135-7; earlier accounts from the 1750s by Newton and Owen concur but are less informative. See John Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader (John Newton) 1750-54* eds. Bernard Martin and Mark Spurrell (London: Epworth, 1962), 30; Nicholas Owen, *Journal of a Slave-Dealer: A View of Some Remarkable Accidents in the Life of Nic. Owen on the Coast of Africa and America from the Year 1746 to the Year 1757*, ed. Eveline Martin (London: Routledge and Sons, 1930), 69 (mention of the society only).

societies. Many of the Africans brought to those areas were from the Sierra Leone region and were sought after because of their knowledge of rice cultivation.<sup>255</sup>

In the Gold Coast region, a number of contemporaries mention societies of nobles, some of which were hereditary and connected to wealth, while others recruited members from among the newly rich. The iconography of these societies was occasionally repeated in the New World (in the West Indies) and therefore clearly had relevance beyond simple social solidarity.<sup>256</sup> In the coastal towns, there were also the *asafo*, military and self-help or civic associations with their own symbols and membership.<sup>257</sup>

In the Niger Delta region, Igbo society was dominated by social fraternities, which included the Mbrenchi (or Embrenche) society, as described by Olaudah Equiano. Membership in the society followed recruitment and initiation, but Equiano said his father was a member, his brother had been initiated, and he himself would also have joined had he lived in Africa until the necessary age. The members of the society in Equiano's time virtually governed the village, making decisions about war and about justice.<sup>258</sup>

In the city states like Calabar, another important institution was the canoe house, an organization formed by and around the owner of large vessels. Although the

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<sup>255</sup> Margaret Washington, *A Peculiar People: Slave Religion and Community-Culture among the Gullahs* (New York: New York University Press, 1988).

<sup>256</sup> Thornton, "War, the State, and Religious Norms in "Coromantee" Thought: The Ideology of an African American Nation," in *Possible Pasts: Becoming Colonial in Early America*, ed. Robert St. George (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 181-200; and Ray Kea, *Settlements, Trade and Politics in the Seventeenth Century Gold Coast* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 101-104.

<sup>257</sup> Kea, *Settlements*, 130-33.

<sup>258</sup> Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Written by Himself*, ed. Robert J. Allison (Boston: Bedford Books, 1995), 34-35.

institution is not described for this early period, some documentary evidence does suggest that at least one man in Calabar was the head of a house like this one, which might form the nucleus of a cross-cutting organization.<sup>259</sup>

In Kongo and Ndongo the mixture of European customs and traditional African cultural practices that had characterized the seventeenth century continued into the eighteenth. Indeed, some Kongo Catholics moved freely between the Christian world and African traditions. In 1727, a witness revealed to the Holy Inquisition then visiting Luanda the case of a certain Dom Simão Affonso. Simão Affonso, the witness claimed, was married in Mbvila but left his wife and “went to the lands of the infidels to use their fetishes and to carry their idols on his head throughout the district of Mbvila.”<sup>260</sup>

Such practices were not limited to Kongo Christians, for an official Portuguese report from the 1780s complained that African traditions in the interior were so strong that Portuguese who resided there engaged in “idolatrous practices” carried out at ritual houses and participated in African funerals and divining. The report also noted that the Portuguese and Afro-Portuguese engaged in oath-making, polygamy, infidelity, adoration of idols, and circumcision.”<sup>261</sup>

Indeed, Central Africans had followed a variety of customs. As early as the mid-seventeenth century Cavazzi noted that the Imbangalas, who had established the state of Kasanje in the middle Kwango, “drill holes in the nose and ears and pass through them some bird feathers” and “add in the middle of the forehead two horns.”<sup>262</sup> He noted as

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<sup>259</sup> Rey de Calabar to Francesco da Monteleone (22 September 1692) in *Monumenta Missionaria*, 14: 224.

<sup>260</sup> Cadernos do Promotor, Arquivo Nacional de Torre de Tombo, Inquisição de Lisboa, Livro 291, 98.

<sup>261</sup> Report of Alexandre, former Bishop of Malaca, 20 June 1788, Arquivo Historicò Ultramarino, Angola.

<sup>262</sup> Cavazzi, *Missione Evangelica* book 1, 143.

well that “in childhood they file [the teeth]...others ...make a gap between the two upper teeth in front and also the lower...this is not as a device but only for greatness.”<sup>263</sup>

Women “have the breast compressed so that they appear with them tied across with a cord...”<sup>264</sup> In Loango, although men had no scarification, women made small incisions on the front and back of their bodies with a nail. The Kongolese, on the other hand, had no scarification, but both Mondongo men and women had scars, the women having four vertical cuts on the backs and navel.<sup>265</sup> Moreover, Oldendorp’s Mondongo informants told him that male infants were circumcised.

West Central Africans continued to practice both male and female initiation, participated in hunting societies and harvest and fishing festivals, and consulted religious practitioners in connection with sickness, births, and other celebrations.<sup>266</sup> They also retained a judicial system based on public ordeals, especially for those who committed murder or adultery. These tests of endurance included ingestion of poison water or other liquids or placing one’s hand in fire or on a heated iron to prove one’s innocence. Social networks in West Central Africa spread over great distances, and the different ethnic groups adopted and exchanged each other’s rituals. For instance, the *indua* poison oracle of Kasanje attracted people from the Portuguese colony as well as those from the

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<sup>263</sup> See references to filed teeth among the burial ground population in “Report of the Skeletal Biology Component of the New York African Burial Ground Project,” chap. 6. Within the group were twenty-three individuals—fifteen men and eight women—who exhibited culturally modified teeth. Dental modification—the intentional filing or chipping of the anterior teeth to form distinctive patterns and styles—was common to many African populations.

<sup>264</sup> Cavazzi, *Missione Evangelica*, book 1, 143.

<sup>265</sup> Oldendorp, *Histoire*, 441-442.

<sup>266</sup> For a discussion of female initiation practices among Kimbundu see Jean-Baptiste Douville, *Un Voyage au Congo, 1827-1828* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1991), 108-09.

Dembos, Kongo, Kissama, and Libolo who went to consult the oracle for the resolution of their conflicts.<sup>267</sup>

Religious practices varied throughout the regions of West and Central Africa, so people who became commodities in the slave trade would have followed varying faiths. Islam continued to exert a strong influence in Senegambia and Sierra Leone (as it had in the seventeenth century) but was frequently syncretic. In those regions, the people practiced both male and female circumcision.<sup>268</sup>

While the interior became strongly Muslim as a result of expansionist wars, most of the coastal regions of West Africa were beyond Islam's grasp as late as the seventeenth century. This situation gradually changed in the eighteenth century as Muslim holy men and traders with roots in the mountainous interior became more and more prominent. In the mid-eighteenth century, visitors remarked that such men, who were often engaged in the trade in *gris-gris* (verses of the Qu'ran placed in amulets and used as a protective charm), could be found in every town along the Sierra Leone coast. While they had failed to bring about widespread conversion as could be found in the mountains, they did create a recognition of the spiritual power of the religion among the inhabitants of the coast.<sup>269</sup>

Traditional African worshippers believed in the concept of the immortality of the soul, but not a resurrection of the dead in the Christian sense. They had holy places,

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<sup>267</sup> Correia Leitão, "Viagem," fol 8, eds. Sebastiyén and Vansina, "Manuel Correia Leitão", 339.

<sup>268</sup> Oldendorp, *Histoire*, 1: 376. See also Bouchard, "Relation," 270-71. Oldendorp's informants from the region he called Kanga—probably Kru-speaking people along the Liberian coast and frequently enslaved in the mid-eighteenth century—noted that merchants in their lands were both Muslim and literate.

<sup>269</sup> Matthews, *Voyage*, 69 (Matthews' experience on the coast was from 1785).



shrines, and other sites where their god (known to the people as Nesua) resided and where the faithful went to pray. Priests also performed mediating roles and administered oaths to detect witches and to uncover other crimes.<sup>270</sup> Descriptions from Sierra Leone indicate the presence of lesser spirits who served the divine being and, thus, created an image of a less monotheistic concept of divinity.<sup>271</sup>

Among the Akan of the Gold Coast, Christianity and Islam were of far less significance than traditional African faith. Small enclaves of Christians settled near the coastal forts, and similarly small numbers of Muslims entered the region for commercial purposes. The Akan religion recognized a high god, usually called Nyame or Nyamkompung, and a variety of territorially-specific deities, whose shrines were the objects of considerable local worship. In addition to shrines, individuals also had personal religious items, sometimes in their houses. Mediation with these various deities was by means of priests, called, among other things, Akomfo.<sup>272</sup>

Among the groups that inhabited the Bight of Benin in the eighteenth century, there was belief in a high god, who was often referred to as Mawu, or Vodun in Fon or a variant of this in Ewe.<sup>273</sup> Ferreira Pires' 1800 account gives the names of other important deities that included Lebá (Legba), the "Good Director of Life and Death," and Bokó, Aganán, a

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<sup>270</sup> Oldendorp, *Histoire*, 379-80.

<sup>271</sup> Matthews, *Voyage*, 66-67.

<sup>272</sup> The most systematic account of Akan religion, albeit for the seventeenth century, is Wilhelm Johann Müller, *Die Afrikanische auf der Guineischen Guld Cust gelegene Landschafft Fetu* (Hamburg, 1673, 3d edition, 1676, reprinted Graz, 1968), 43-101; (English translation of 3d edition in Jones, *German Sources* with original pagination). For the eighteenth century, Oldendorp, *Histoire*, 389-91 (in Asante); 392-4 (Akyem); 395-99 (northern groups). Most of his space is devoted to religious beliefs as related to him by a dozen informants from various areas; Ferdinand Ludvig Rømer, *Tilforladelig*, 49-106 (a rambling account without much theological order or rigor, much of it from Accra based on testimony of Putti [Okpoti], one of Rømer's principal informants).

<sup>273</sup> Oldendorp, *Histoire*, 412, 423.

royal leopard, with a priest or *loko*, in charge of each one.<sup>274</sup> The god often appeared in oracles or in shrines of various types; sometimes certain animals were held to have divine characteristics.<sup>275</sup> Dahomeans were little influenced by Christianity but did not discredit it. In the 1780s, the bi-racial wife of the Portuguese interpreter at court stopped a terrifying thunderstorm by saying a series of prayers to the Virgin Mary and then invoked an image of Saint Anthony. During the encounter, the ruler declared that the “true fetish” was that of the whites. He agreed to pay for one mass each week at the chapel in the Portuguese factory, but he never converted to the faith.<sup>276</sup>

In the Niger Delta, most Igbo groups called their high god Chukwu, and believed that he manifested himself in trees and other places. Some of the faithful were “living oracles” to the supernatural to which others had recourse, and the people believed that the intentions of the Other World were most often manifested in “good and bad spirits.”<sup>277</sup>

In the eighteenth century missionary critics of Kongolese Catholicism continued to denounce the retention of local rituals and moved especially against the local priests by burning their spirit houses. Yet, throughout the Kimbundu and Dembos areas, the ubiquitous presence of altars with images, many with statues of famous Catholic saints alongside statues from local beliefs, spoke to the strong continuity of African rituals.

These public altars were located throughout the Mbundu region, and there was a local

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<sup>274</sup> Ferreira Pires, *Viagem*, 90-91.

<sup>275</sup> Oldendorp, *Histoire*, 420-2. Oldendorp also cites accounts in early books, such as Bosman and des Marchais, along with his own informant, who was a Creole whose parents were from Whydah and had told him stories of the past in their home. Another informant from Wawu mentioned a “Tiger” as a god, which the people treated the same way as the Whydan snake, 424-5. See also Ferreira Pires, *Viagem*, ed. de Lessa, 131-3.

<sup>276</sup> Ferreira Pires, *Viagem*, 93-4.

<sup>277</sup> Oldendorp, *Histoire*, 430, 432-3

priesthood that attended to them. The altars and the local priests competed directly with the foreign priests and officials who were intent on burning them and eliminating African religious authorities. For example, the Portuguese described the Dembos (a region that supplied slaves to the British) as “idolatrous Catholics” who adored altars that contained “massive wooden idols” and other human figures of both sexes.”<sup>278</sup> The rulers of some Dembos states, however, attempted to reassure the Portuguese in Luanda that they were making every effort to “baptize the population” as well as “destroying the idols and barbarous customs.”<sup>279</sup> The Capuchin missionary, Father Cherubino de Savona, who lived in the Kongo in the 1760s, also discerned the presence of indigenous Kongo practices among the population in the interior of the kingdom. He wrote that the people nearest the capital were “good Christians,” but those in the eastern province of Wandu, even though fully baptized and asking for missionaries, were “full of superstition and idolatry.”<sup>280</sup>

### 9.2.2 *The West Indian Cultural Background*

New York Africans who had sojourned in the West Indies for an extended period of time would have been influenced initially by the new cultural patterns that emerged as

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<sup>278</sup> Correia, *História*, 2: 202.

<sup>279</sup> Letter from Dom Alvaro Filho Segundo persona de Dembo Ambwilla to Sousa Coutinho, 28 February 1767, Arquivo Histórico Nacional de Angola (hereafter AHNA), Ofícios para Angola -79-A-2, fol. 2.

<sup>280</sup> Cherubino da Savona, "Congo 1775. Breve Raguaglio del Regno di Congo, e sue Missione scritto dal Padre Cherubino da Savona...", (Carlo Toso, n.d.) "Relazioni inedite di P. Cherubono Cassinis da Savona sul 'Regno del Congo e sue Missioni'" in *L'Italia Francescana* 45 (1974), 208.

a consequence of their circumstances in the islands. Although bondage challenged African social and cultural structures, enslaved people continued to rely on those institutions that provided physical, psychological, and spiritual support. Kinship networks continued to serve this end.

Certain scholars who have studied West Indian slavery have maintained that although familial structures existed under slavery, the system caused fragmentation and led to alternative forms of unions, which were neither obligatory nor stable. Recent scholarship, however, lends support to the idea of the presence of nuclear single family units. Barry Higman, for instance, has concluded that such families served as a model, despite constant assaults upon it that included separation of mates.<sup>281</sup> Since his research was concentrated on enslaved families in the rural areas, Higman concedes the probability that urban units and households were headed by women as a consequence of miscegenation, low sex ratio, and the size of slave holdings.<sup>282</sup>

The types of families that emerged during the period of slavery varied as much as did the islands. In some places and times, families consisted of husband and wife or might include siblings. Even households consisting of mothers and their children (and perhaps a grandmother) may have been less matrifocal than their composition would suggest.<sup>283</sup> The practice of inter-plantation marriages, whereby men and women found mates off the estate, reflected a desire to avoid in-breeding. Such practices led enslaved people to travel long distances at night to visit their wives and partners.

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<sup>281</sup> Barry Higman, "The Slave Family and Households in the British West Indies, 1800-1834" in *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 6 (1975), 261-287.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

Misunderstanding the nature of the enslaved family unit, some West Indian managers attributed night travel to promiscuity among Africans. One manager lamented his inability to

confine Negroes in their choice of concubines. This plurality of wives constituting their greatest luxury arising from natural habits and constituted by general usage among them. In this country, promiscuous intercourse is being carried beyond all bounds of licentiousness known in Europe. They are not satisfied to confine their intercourse at home but carried on abroad on neighbouring Estates that they may have less interruption at home and less jealousy abroad.... There is much difficulty to keep the Negroes Women at home while forward in pregnancy or at any labour.<sup>284</sup>

Other planters recognized the importance of marriages and families to Africans, especially in the age of amelioration that occurred at the end of the eighteenth century. Hence, they sought to introduce such unions on their estates. Rather than a humanitarian gesture, however, their actions were designed to increase the possibility of breeding. Aiming to encourage co-resident unions instead of allowing their enslaved people to augment the population of other estates, managers offered marriage incentives in the form of cash. On one estate, the owner advised his manager: "Upon the marriage of a young couple ... I desire you will not only assign them a lot of land, but that you will have the house built for them altogether at my expense." Towards the end of the eighteenth century in Barbados, Africans were encouraged to marry at their naming ceremonies. The managers selected their wives, and they were joined accordingly.<sup>285</sup>

As the church became more important in the lives of enslaved people near the end of the eighteenth century, marriages occurred more regularly. The churches became

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<sup>284</sup> Thomas Lawson to Henry Goulburn, 19 January 1907, Goulburn Papers, 319/151/32, Surrey (England) Record Office.

<sup>285</sup> George Pinkard, *Notes on the West Indies*, 2 vols. (London: Baldwin, Cradock and Joy, 1816), 1: 457.

the allies of the planters in the effort to encourage large families. Apart from gifts, clothing and monetary awards at the time of the birth of children, those families that had seven offspring received the following indulgences: the women were exempted from all estate work and their husbands were entitled to tether animals on plantation lands. They could also transfer this right to others.

African peoples found their practices of child-rearing altered as a consequence of their enslavement. Considered valuable property because they were future sources of labor, the rearing of children fell mainly as a responsibility of estate management. On some estates, black children were thoroughly examined every Sunday morning to ensure that they were free of vermin, yaws, and worms. Their meals were prepared in common kitchens by specially selected superannuated enslaved women. When parents died, especially if they had been in the active service of the estate, the management made a special effort to rear the children under the watchful eyes of the overseer.<sup>286</sup>

Slavery also altered the characteristics of African culture. Separation from the homeland and the demands and restrictions imposed on their new lives required that enslaved Africans create traditions shaped by their new reality. The steady stream of imports into the West Indian islands, however, also served to renew the African heritage of those long removed from their homelands or born in the Americas. Hence, Africans in diaspora enjoyed certain cultural continuities that contributed to their sense of self. Through religion, language, dance, song, folklore, relationship to their elders, and burial, they fashioned an existence for themselves that circumvented their bondage.

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<sup>286</sup> Carrington, *The Sugar Industry*, 136-38.

Millions of Africans imported into the Caribbean brought their religious beliefs with them, and although they faced the hostility of the white planters and clergymen, they “clung desperately to their deep-seated notions..<sup>287</sup> The syncretic practices they had developed in Africa continued in the West Indies, as Christian beliefs and practices were subsumed within the framework of an African worldview. On some islands, there was a greater emphasis on African ideas within the worship ceremony. This was particularly the case in Haiti where voodoo (Vodun), identified as of Dahomean origins, was possibly the most African of the religions and where many practitioners were also members of the Catholic Church.

Shango (practiced in Trinidad and which is considered to be similar to Voodoo and of Yoruba origin) had also incorporated many Catholic doctrines. This religion and many others such as Santeria, a New World expression of the Yoruba religion and its counterparts Candomble and Macumba, make significant use of the drums, dance, and song (chanting) during worship. Africans in the West Indies danced to achieve “spirit possession,” and they may have worshipped several gods, especially since they emerged from numerous linguistic and other ethnic groups.<sup>288</sup> In the Caribbean, therefore, the divinities of different groups were merged together. Opposition to African religions led the planter class to suppress African traditions. Hence, the black population turned to the priests as well as to the obeah for satisfaction against injustices. Both groups acquired

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<sup>287</sup> Hesketh J. Bell, *Obeah, Witchcraft in the West Indies*, originally published 1889 (reprinted Connecticut: Negro University Press, 1970), 8.

<sup>288</sup> Dale Bisnauth, *History of Religion in the Caribbean* (Kingston: Kingston Press, 1996).

immense stature in slave societies and had great influence over the population.<sup>289</sup>

Many obeah men and women used herbs and plants to cure illnesses, thus leaving a long tradition of herbal remedies throughout the region. The planters denied that healing in this way was possible, and they accused the obeah practitioners of using paraphernalia, potions, spells, and varied substances (including poison) to harm their victims. Laws and ordinances were adopted to stamp it out, but none succeeded, as many men and women continued to practice obeah in spite of the colonial laws prohibiting it.<sup>290</sup>

As the sacred and secular worlds of African peoples overlapped in their homelands, so too did they under slavery. Music, especially, filled spiritual needs as well as provided cultural support in their daily secular routines. Even during the Middle Passage, they used song to buoy their spirits and to keep alive the memory of homelands. In addition, the captives immediately set about establishing bonds which would recreate ties that would remind them of their village codes and practices. Once they arrived on the plantations, Africans devised ways to express their cultural roots with a minimum of white interference. Since they held an ideological belief in transmigration, they could also employ their musical instruments and songs to retain a cultural link with Africa. Two instruments which they brought with them or recreated were the banjar and the toombah. One eighteenth-century commentator wrote of these instruments:

The banjar is somewhat similar to the guitar, the bottom, or under part, is formed of one half of a large calabash, to which is prefixed a wooden neck, and it is strung with cat gut and wire. The instrument is the invention of, and was brought here by the African negroes, who are most expert in the performances thereon, which are principally their own country tunes, indeed I do not remember ever to have heard any thing like European numbers from it track. The toombah is

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<sup>289</sup> Bell, *Obeah, Witchcraft in the West Indies*, 8-10.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid.



similar to the tabor, and has the gingles of tin shells.<sup>291</sup>

The banjar and the toombah helped to form “the band,” which sometimes included a type of African drum and a rattle as well. The drum, played by two men, was made of a hollow piece of wood, with dried sheep-skin tied over the end. One of the players sat “across the body of the drum, as it lies lengthwise upon the ground, beats and kicks the sheep-skin at the end, in violent exertion with his hands and heels; another sitting upon the ground at the other end, behind the man upon the drum beats upon the wooden sides of it with two sticks.”<sup>292</sup> The band also included singers of both sexes who performed African songs. The band played at dances mainly on Sundays in “any square or any corner of the town.”<sup>293</sup> In Louisiana these dances took place at the famous “Congo Square.” In the Caribbean the dance took place with couples in a circle in the center of a large crowd. The structure of such a dance is described in detail by George Pinckard:

The dance consists of stamping of the feet, twisting of the body, and a number of strange indecent attitudes. It is a severe bodily exertion...for the limbs have little to do with it. The head is held erect, or, occasionally, inclined a little forward; the hands nearly meet before; the elbows are fixed, pointing from the sides ; and, the lower extremities being held rigid, the whole person is moved without lifting the feet from the ground. Making the head and the limbs fixed points, they writhe and turn the body upon its axis slowly advancing towards each other, or retreating to the other parts of the ring.... Not a smile not a significant glance, nor an immodest look escapes from either sex. Occasionally, they change the figure by stamping upon the feet, or making a more general movement of the person, but these are only temporary variations; the twistings and turnings of the body seeming to constitute the supreme excellence of the dance.<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> John Luffman, *A Brief Account of the Island of Antigua* (London: J. Luffman, 1790), 135-136.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

<sup>294</sup> Pinckard, *Notes on the West Indies*, 126.

Over the years, Africans retained most features of their dances, despite laws enacted by local legislatures forbidding such behavior. And despite the belief that these dances were lewd and indecent, with time, white participation in them led to their general acceptability.

### 9.3 *African-American Social Structure and Cultural Characteristics in the Eighteenth Century*

#### 9.3.1 *Introduction*

The foregoing discussion conveys just how diverse were the beliefs and practices of those societies from which New York Africans arrived. Upon arrival in the colonial city, they drew upon these traditions to forge bonds with each other as well as to cope with the myriad troubles attending their enslavement. Social networks forged between the native and African born, and a sense of shared circumstances fostered cultural continuities and identity in the black community.

#### 9.3.2 *Establishing and Maintaining Family*

Cadwallader Colden's "Negro Wench" exasperated her owner. The young woman had fallen in love with Gabriel, one of Colden's laborers, and Colden was determined that his own economic needs would prevail over the romantic interests of his chattel. Hence, he sold the young man, and when told that he might try to return, Colden conspired to keep him away from "that Wench that I value."<sup>295</sup>

Africans and native-born blacks who resided in New York in the eighteenth century shared the desire to find life mates and build families. Wills, runaway

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<sup>295</sup> The Letters and Papers of Cadwallader Colden, I:193.

advertisements, diaries, and letters provide a glimpse of the difficulty of forging life-long ties and developing a sense of community. Patterns of slaveholding, demographic realities, and the looming threat of sale and division as a consequence of punishment or the owner's death compromised the ability of enslaved people to enjoy this most basic of human rights.

Besides owners' self-interest, black family structure and stability in colonial New York depended largely on the unique economic characteristics of each ward in the city (see Table 9.1).<sup>296</sup> In the east ward, the center of shipbuilding and commerce, a demand for unskilled, manual labor produced the largest concentration of enslaved people into a single community. It is here that New York's mercantile families—the Beekmans, Schuylers, and Philipses—conducted their business. Half of the whites in the ward held bondspeople, most of them men, the majority of whom lived alone.<sup>297</sup> Thelma Foote has shown that while such patterns would have made it difficult for these men to form bonds with other black people within their residences, they had opportunities to interact with other laborers from the ward (and those brought in from the outside as hires as well) in the shipyards and on the docks.<sup>298</sup>

By contrast, the south ward was dominated somewhat by women who frequently comprised the sole black laborer in a household. Unlike the men in the ward who had ample opportunity to interact with others because of hiring out, these women would have

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<sup>296</sup> The following discussion is based primarily on the 1703 census. Demographic patterns would have changed over time. For discussion of this trend, see Thomas J. Davis, "These Enemies of Their Own Household: A Note on the Troublesome Slave Population of Eighteenth Century New York City." *The Journal of the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society*, 5: (1984). See also Foote, "Black Life in Colonial Manhattan, 90-125.

<sup>297</sup> Foote, "Black Life in Colonial Manhattan," 94-95.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid.

had occasion for social engagement primarily as a consequence of weekly trips to the local market and the tea water pump.

The most affluent area of the city, the dock ward, was home to the wealthiest merchants. The laborers these men held were employed at the owners' businesses (many of which were located in the east ward) or hired out. Hires were imported from the east ward as well. More than two-thirds of the residents held enslaved laborers, and better than one third of those laborers, many of whom were women, lived alone.

The least affluent neighborhood, the north ward, was home largely to journeymen and day laborers. Nearly half of the residences held a single enslaved person, and men

**Table 9.1: New York's Black Population by Ward, 1703**

<b>Ward</b>	<b>Black Males</b>	<b>Black Females</b>	<b>Black Male Children (under 16)</b>	<b>Black Female Children (under 16)</b>	<b>Total</b>
East Ward	77	78	37	22	214
South Ward	57	58	23	34	172
North Ward	31	18	5	4	58
West Ward	32	30	16	8	86
Dock Ward	68	79	24	26	197
Out Ward	33	13	19	7	72
<b>Total</b>	<b>298</b>	<b>276</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>799</b>

Source: United States Bureau of the Census. *A Century of Population Growth: From the First Census of the United States to the Twelfth, 1790-1900* (1989). This differs somewhat from the figures arrived at by Foote in "Black Life in Colonial Manhattan," 90-127.

outnumbered women by a significant degree. The west and out wards were the most remote areas of the city, with the latter falling outside the city limits. Here, the demand for farm laborers resulted in black men greatly outnumbering black women and children.

The majority of New York Africans lived in households with two or three bondspeople. Frequently, a mother and her child (or children) occupied a dwelling under the same roof as their owner. Adult males often belonged to someone else and resided in

a separate household.<sup>299</sup> The denial of desired visiting rights with their families frustrated black men and led to confrontations with offending slave owners. One such instance allegedly led to the burning of the fort that marked the supposed conspiracy of 1741.<sup>300</sup>

The inadequacy of housing for enslaved laborers and concern that domestics would be distracted by the burden of caring for dependent children too young to contribute to the household economy prompted some owners to discourage childbearing. Women who refused or were unable to keep their procreative functions in check were subject to sale. Illustrative of this is an advertisement which appeared in a 1751 edition of a New York newspaper:

To be Sold, an excellent Negro Wench, about 20 years old, with a male child, about three months old; the Wench has had the Smallpox, can cook, wash, and iron, can be well recommended, and is Sold for no other Fault than being too fruitful.<sup>301</sup>

A similar newspaper entry advertises the sale of “a young Wench about 29 years old, that drinks no strong Drink, and gets no Children, a very good Drudge.”<sup>302</sup> Under unrelenting pressure to remain childless and unable to provide adequate care for their children already born, enslaved women sometimes embraced a horrific solution. In at least one instance, an African woman, unhinged by her owner’s complaints, “took her own young child from her breast, and laid it in the cold, [where] it froze to death.”<sup>303</sup>

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<sup>299</sup> Joyce Goodfriend, *Before the Melting Pot: Society and Culture in Colonial New York City, 1664-1730*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). See chap. 6.

<sup>300</sup> Horsmanden, *The New York Conspiracy*, xiv.

<sup>301</sup> New York *Post-Boy*, May 27, 1751.

<sup>302</sup> Quoted in Foote, “Black Life in Colonial Manhattan, 1664-1786,” 85.

<sup>303</sup> Horsmanden, *The New York Conspiracy*, 87.

Demographic and slaveholding patterns doubtless encouraged enslaved men and women to form familial bonds with non-kin who were in close proximity to them. In this way they could endure the isolation of their owners' households and find lasting and fulfilling ties when separated from spouses, parents, children, and siblings.

### 9.3.3 *The Specter of Sale*

The possibility of sale rested heavily on the minds and hearts of the enslaved. Financial considerations or diminished labor needs might lead an owner to offer up his laborers for purchase. In such instances, an entire family could find itself defenseless and its future uncertain, as the following eighteenth-century advertisement reveals:

To be sold: a black family, consisting of a man, his wife, a fine girl about twelve, another girl about five years old, and a male child capable of running about alone, the parents are honest, sober, neat, quiet, well disposed; have lived in the country; the man an excellent farmer, the woman a good cook, and excellent in a dairy; the eldest girl very handy in attending at table, the younger a child of hopes; in short, it is a useful trustworthy comely family, and of late years accustomed to live in this city. The above will be sold either separate or altogether.<sup>304</sup>

Similarly, the death of an owner almost always necessitated a division of his estate. As property, enslaved people found themselves listed as part of the inventory and scattered to the numerous relatives who lay claim to the estate of the deceased. The disposal of enslaved property under these circumstances is typified in the case of New York merchant James Shaw. Shaw owned a family that consisted of a man, woman, and boy.

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<sup>304</sup> New York *Daily Advertiser*, June 8, 1793.

Upon his death, each was bequeathed to separate members of his family.<sup>305</sup>

Separation as a consequence of punishment proved to be an all too real experience for New York Africans as well. Recalcitrant laborers faced the likelihood of sale away from family and friends to the South or the West Indies. Swedish traveler Peter Kalm noted that "nothing makes more impression upon a negro [in the North] than that of sending him over to the West Indies, in case he will not reform."<sup>306</sup> In cases where enslaved people had been accused of crimes that threatened the safety of white New Yorkers, financially conscious owners sought to protect their investment by electing to transport such dangerous property out of the colony rather than agreeing to its destruction. In this manner, 71 of the 101 enslaved people convicted in the 1741 incident were transported from the colony rather than forced to face execution.<sup>307</sup>

Despite encountering obstacles, black men and women insisted on establishing familial relationships. John Sharpe, the chaplain of British forces in New York, in 1712, spoke of enslaved people forming marriages by "mutual consent."<sup>308</sup> While it may be argued that identifying these unions as marriages is inaccurate (since the owners did not recognize such relationships as legal or any more binding than those between livestock), one should remember that enslaved people maintained their own values and fashioned a worldview independent of slaveholders.

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<sup>305</sup> Abstracts of Wills, 8 (1771-1776), *Collections*, (1899), New York Historical Society.

<sup>306</sup> *Peter Kalm's Travels in North America*, ed. Adolph Benson, 2 vols. (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1964), 1:208.

<sup>307</sup> Horsmanden, "A List of Negroes Committed on Account of the Conspiracy," in *The New York Conspiracy*, following page 465.

<sup>308</sup> Sharpe, "Proposals for Erecting a School," 355. The chaplain's concern, however, was not that blacks may have problems establishing familial relationships, but that they did so without benefit of the "blessing of the church".

#### 9.3.4 *The Sacred World of New York Africans*

Perhaps in no way was this independent worldview more obvious than in the sacred realm. In explaining why he felt compelled to part with his enslaved cook in 1762, John Watts cited a certain unfortunate (at least from his perspective) cultural proclivity the woman suffered:

Mr. Isaac Young-Husband has a Wench of mine in his hands called Belinda, middle aged but not very comely, she is a simple innocent creature & a very good Cook, has lived long in my family & indeed was a most necessary Servant, but her simplicity led her to trifle about charms which alarmed my female family too much to keep her.<sup>309</sup>

Similar traditional African beliefs and practices were noted, especially in connection with resistance. In the 1712 uprising, for instance, enslaved men sought invincibility by covering their bodies with what they believed to be a special powder and confirmed their commitment to each other and the revolt by swearing a blood oath. And in the 1741 “conspiracy” black men swore upon an oath of “thunder and lightening.”<sup>310</sup>

The infusion of African-born people, especially after the mid-eighteenth century, kept traditional African beliefs fresh in the minds of the enslaved. Moreover, significant numbers of captives arriving from Africa came from regions of strong Islamic presence. Presumably, at least some of them were professed Muslims who attempted to follow their faith, even under slavery.<sup>311</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> John Watts to John Riddell, November 27, 1762, Letter Book of John Watts, January 1, 1762-December 22, 1765, 97.

<sup>310</sup> For discussion of the 1712 revolt and 1741 “conspiracy”, see chapter 12 of this report.

<sup>311</sup> See Michael Gomez, “Muslims in New York,” chapter in forthcoming book.



Christian beliefs remained influential with some enslaved people, however, as the runaway advertisement for the return of Andrew Saxton makes clear. An enslaved laborer owned by Jacobus Van Cortlandt, Saxton was described as well-spoken and “professeth himself to be a Roman Catholick.”<sup>312</sup> But while the earliest New York Africans had joined, married, and baptized their children within the church (expecting that such actions would afford them a more favorable position in the society and perhaps even lead to freedom), those who came later seemed less inclined toward church membership.<sup>313</sup> Neither were white New Yorkers interested in winning converts among their enslaved property. John Sharpe complained in 1712 that “the first hindrance to the truly pious work of Christianizing [black people] is an unwillingness in their masters that they should be so.”<sup>314</sup> Such resistance, Sharpe maintained, sprang from the belief that blacks lacked an immortal soul and that Christianity “makes them rather worse than better.”<sup>315</sup>

Fearful that religious instruction made enslaved people rebellious, New Yorkers resisted the efforts of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (or S.P.G.). In the first decade of the eighteenth century, the S.P.G. established and supported a catechetical school in which to instruct “Indians and negro’s who are Slaves at New York...in the knowledge of Jesus Christ.” Elias Neau, appointed instructor, held classes (which included white indentured servants and apprentices as well) in his home

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<sup>312</sup> New York *Gazette*, August 27 to September 3, 1733.

<sup>313</sup> For discussion of the “Africanization of the northern colonies” and its impact on religion, see Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 60-61, 189-190.

<sup>314</sup> Rev. John Sharpe, “Proposals for Erecting a School...,” 13:350.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.

on Wednesday and Friday evenings and on Sundays after church services.<sup>316</sup>

Contemporaries found Neau to be a conscientious catechist who visited his students in their humble residences when they were sick and who was determined to win enslaved people over to God. Although large numbers of African Americans did not or could not partake of the instruction that Neau offered, those who did enjoyed a heightened status within the community of enslaved people because of their literacy.<sup>317</sup> Neau's school suffered severe reproach as a consequence of the 1712 revolt, but classes continued until the 1720s, when he died.

Despite Neau's efforts, many of his black students had not pursued baptism as an end to religious instruction. Sharpe suggested that they lacked incentive to do so, given that baptism produced no material change in their civil status: "...they find their usage the same, the appellations, the exactions, censures and severities...if they had the benefit of our laws after Baptism where life or member is concerned...it would be a motive to their diligence in attaining a sufficient measure of knowledge in order to be baptized."<sup>318</sup> He asserted as well that the practice of polygamy prevented some black men and women from seeking baptism. Whether by preference of the enslaved or by the designs of an owner, concurrent multiple marriages precluded Christian unions and barred Africans thus engaged in such practices from entering the ranks of the saved.<sup>319</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> Sharpe, "Proposals for Erecting a School," 354.

<sup>317</sup> Goodfriend, *Before the Melting Pot*, 126-132.

<sup>318</sup> Sharpe, "Proposals for Erecting a School...", 355.

<sup>319</sup> Sharpe, "Proposals for Erecting a School."

### 9.3.5 *The Secular Life of New York Africans*

Marginalized by a society that defined them as property, Africans and people of African descent created a world in which they found respite from the drudgery of labor while pursuing their own social and cultural interests. Despite numerous laws which attempted to restrict their behavior, enslaved people enjoyed a variety of secular cultural expressions within the environment of New York City. Men (overwhelmingly, but on occasion women joined as well) gathered at the various establishments where they could drink and talk freely—taverns, dram shops, tippling houses, and the tea water pump. Men whose owners were out of the city for extended periods of time and hence were virtually free to move about with little challenge, and those ostensibly on errands, found white proprietors (and black ones too) more than willing to bend or break the laws for profit. Such gatherings afforded enslaved men opportunities for fellowship as well as the chance to share lamentations concerning their bondage.<sup>320</sup>

African-influenced cultural expressions were discernible at certain street markets where enslaved people entertained each other (and incidentally, white spectators) through song and dance and exhibited their skill with certain musical instruments. At such gatherings, they interacted with both men and women, those arriving in town from the countryside to vend a variety of goods, and blacks from the city going about their daily chores.<sup>321</sup> Thomas DeVoe, who wrote a history of the various markets that dotted the

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<sup>320</sup> Testimony offered at the trials of the men and women charged in the 1741 incident suggests that New York Africans had grown accustomed to congregating in public and private establishments where they entertained each other and commiserated. See Horsmanden, *The New York Conspiracy* and Thomas J. Davis, *A Rumor of Revolt: The "Great Negro Plot" in Colonial New York*. New York: The Free Press, 1985.

<sup>321</sup> Foote, "Black Life in Colonial Manhattan," 236-37.

New York landscape in the colonial period, addressed the issue of black cultural expression, especially dancing. Although his research was conducted a generation after the demise of slavery, he was able to interview people who remembered the vibrant culture that was evident in the markets. DeVoe surmised that the introduction of “public negro dancing” occurred at the Catharine Market, where butchers, fishermen, and other vendors erected stands and sold their goods. The unique dancing style, he believed, was first introduced by blacks from outside the city, especially Long Island and New Jersey, who came to town during holidays and who earned a few shillings by dancing in the markets. Eventually, city blacks competed with the others for the money to be made. DeVoe describes the “break-down” or “shake-down” that characterized black dance as taking place on a board or shingle that was approximately five or six feet long. The contestant was confined to the plank and danced while others tapped out the music by “beating their hands on the sides of their legs and the noise of the heel.”<sup>322</sup> These expressions would have created and reinforced a sense of a separate black culture that encompassed the many ethnic groups within the larger community of people of African descent.

These daily cultural expressions revealed the strength of the continued reliance of New York Africans on an African heritage. Music and dance had been central in the lives of Africans in the societies from which black New Yorkers were plucked. They accompanied rites associated with birth, initiation, marriage, healing, war, even death.

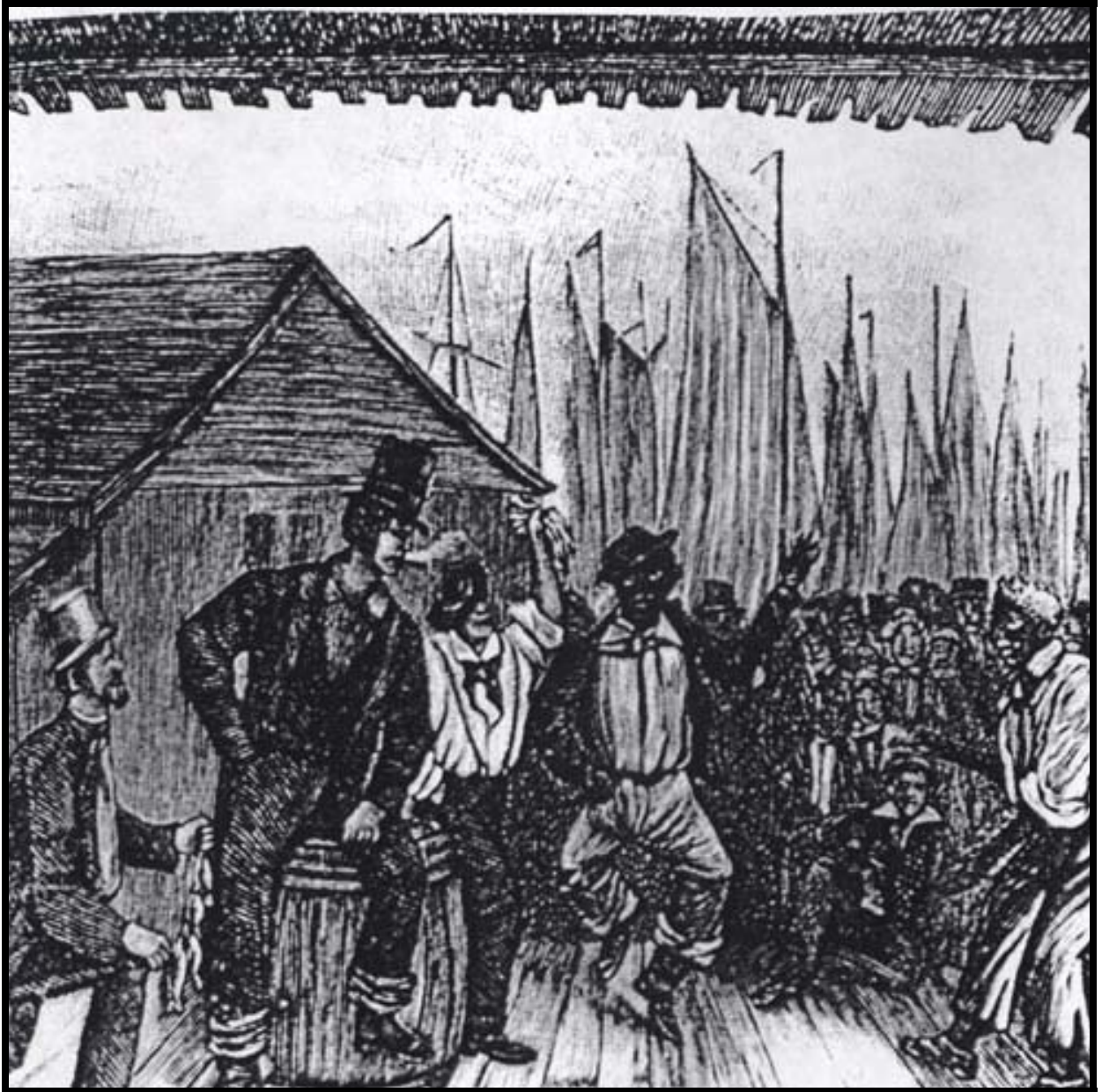
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<sup>322</sup> Thomas DeVoe, *The Market Book* (New York, 1860), 344.

Music took center stage at religious ceremonies and in the various festivals that celebrated harvest. White contemporaries commented on the distinctiveness of certain cultural practices among black people, although usually in a less than complementary fashion. Expressive dance was seen as “lewd and indecent gesticulation”; vocalizations became “sounds of frightful dissonance.”<sup>323</sup>

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<sup>323</sup> Quoted in Shane White, *Somewhat More Independent: the End of Slavery in New York City, 1770-1810*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 96-97. The commentary reflected the observations of Pinkster in Albany. However, Africans in New York City engaged in similar kinds of cultural expression and perhaps attracted the same response from whites locally.



**Figure 9.1:** Dancing at the Market (from Augustine E. Costello, *Our Firemen: A History of the New York Fire Department Volunteer and Paid* (New York: A.E. Costello, 1887).

Such differences were especially pronounced in the New York African's celebration of Pinkster. Originating with the Dutch observance of Pentecost, some have argued that by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Pinkster had been appropriated by Africans and had become the occasion for festival and merrymaking. Eileen Southern has suggested that the celebration and its African influences were reminiscent of those at Congo Square in New Orleans.<sup>324</sup> James Fenimore Cooper's depiction of Pinkster in his nineteenth-century fictional work *Satanstoe* suggests that the celebrations occurred in the vicinity of today's City Hall Park, near the location of the African Burial Ground. Thus far, however, no documentary evidence has been uncovered which places it there.<sup>325</sup>

The greater mobility of enslaved men enabled them to form informal organizations based on residency and a shared desire to resist efforts to proscribe their lives. Smith's Fly Boys and the Long Bridge Boys identified with neighborhoods within the wards where they lived and labored, and their associations doubtless provided a kind of bond, an extension of kinship, that likely eluded them as individuals. Although it has been argued that these associations consisted of acculturated men, it is likely that such groups represented an attempt on the part of people of African descent, daily reminded of

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<sup>324</sup> Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 53. A.J. Williams-Myers, "Pinkster Carnival: Africanisms in the Hudson River Valley," in *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* (1985) supports the idea that Pinkster was a continuation of Africanisms. Not all historians, however, have emphasized this African influence on Pinkster celebrations among New York Africans. Shane White acknowledges the importance of African traditions in the celebration but believes that its blending of both European and African cultures is of greater significance.

<sup>325</sup> See *Satanstoe* (New York: American Book Company, 1937, reprint of 1845), 60. Cooper's description of the celebration emphasized African traditions as well, along with the widespread attendance of African peoples at these gatherings, including those residing many miles from the city. Although Shane White discounts the description because its source is fictional, Cooper's depiction, so recently rendered after the abandonment of the practice, may have had a factual base.

their roots, to use their heritage as a framework when fashioning social institutions.<sup>326</sup>

Such reminders did not preclude participation in European-inspired social networks. Before the mid-eighteenth century, black men had formed an association that took the name “Free masons”, after an organization whose membership comprised the mercantile and political elite of the city and of English society. Their “impudence to assume the style”<sup>327</sup> of such a respected and influential group offended and exasperated New York’s white population, but enslaved men determined that they would reject the status that their owners had assigned to them.

In contrast, certain black organizations devolved into criminal gangs. Such activity represented resistance against their circumscribed lives (as many have noted) as well as a means of supplementing the subsistence provided by their owners. The Geneva Club—so-called after a group of men from the Long Bridge area broke into a tavern cellar and pilfered Geneva gin—was one of a number of such groups that stole from local merchants and households and fenced the goods to white men and women who were seeking their own means of survival.<sup>328</sup> The money to be made from such activities could materially enhance the quality of life not only for the men themselves, but for those to whom they felt responsible—wives, children, and other relatives—despite physical separation resulting from the patterns of slaveholdings.

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<sup>326</sup> For a discussion of associations among enslaved men, see Craig Wilder, *In the Company of Black Men: The African Influence on African American Culture in New York City* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

<sup>327</sup> Horsmanden, *The New York Conspiracy*, 67.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid.



## ***10.0 Disease and Health***

### ***10.1 Introduction***

While labor shaped the experiences of enslaved Africans in colonial New York, disease and ill health exacerbated the burdens of work. Some of the afflictions from which they suffered left markers on the bones, offering clues from the grave of an individual's disease history. Bowing of the femur and tibia (an indication of rickets), dental pathologies and developmental defects (including caries and abscesses), and other evidence of nutritional deficiencies and childhood stress are evident in the remains. In addition, one sees markers for infectious diseases, numerous fractures, and osteoarthritis (as already discussed in Chapter 8 of this report).<sup>329</sup> The likelihood that many of those in the African Burial Ground were either African born or had sojourned in the West Indies makes it imperative that any discussion of health as it relates to this population consider the disease environment they encountered before their arrival in New York.

### ***10.2 Disease Environment and Health in West and West Central Africa***

Extant sources provide little information concerning the health practices among Africans in the eighteenth century, either in the west or central region. We do know that in some areas, such as the Senegambia, the people were subject to recurring famines, caused in part by the uncertainties of the climate and war.<sup>330</sup> War and the slave trade also had long-term demographic effects in certain regions, unbalancing the sex ratios as

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<sup>329</sup> See "Report of the Skeletal Biology Component of the New York African Burial Ground Project," chap. 10.

<sup>330</sup> Response du conseil superieur du Senegal au memoire d'observation sur ledit Senegal et Goree du mois de fevrier 1754, C6/14, Archives Nationales de France. For a larger picture focusing on famine, see Webb, *Desert Frontier*.

adults, especially men, were removed from the population either through death or sale. Claude Boucard's report on Bambuk in 1729 noted that "all the villages are well populated; in effect one sees in them a great number of children and men, but I think in all three kingdoms [that made up Bambuk] there are scarcely three thousand men capable of bearing arms."<sup>331</sup>

What is known about health practices in West Central Africa centers around treatment for ailments. Most observers identified the priests (Ngangas) as medical practitioners, in addition to carrying out their spiritual functions. The missionary Giovanni Francesco da Roma, writing in the seventeenth century, noted that the Ngangas used a variety of herbal treatments, spoke to 'the Devil in calabash', made circles on the soil or in the air, then asked the sick person if he felt better. If the patient's health improved, he paid the Nganga and left. If, on the other hand, the patient had a relapse, he went back to the Nganga and was treated until either cured or dead. De Roma also noted that the Ngangas used a lancet to phlebotomize and that the people, especially the women, were "superstitious" and believed in omens such as birdcalls.<sup>332</sup> Among the Mondongo, priests also provided medical advice during states of possession.<sup>333</sup>

### *10.3 Health Conditions and the Middle Passage*

Whatever their condition when they left their homelands, the trek to the port of embarkation and the several weeks or months of travel spent traversing the ocean

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<sup>331</sup> Boucard, "Relation," 255.

<sup>332</sup> Giovanni Francesco da Roma, *Breve Relatione*, 114-16

<sup>333</sup> Oldendorp, *Histoire*, 439.

virtually guaranteed poor health by the time Africans landed in the Americas. Africans enslaved in the transatlantic trade suffered physically and psychologically, as they were forced to leave the familiar behind and often walk great distances overland to departing ships. Along the way, they experienced hunger and exhaustion and devastating loss (especially when loved ones, too weak to continue, were abandoned and left to die along the side of the road).<sup>334</sup>

A second stage of emotional and physical distress began with incarceration in holding facilities while awaiting the arrival of a ship. Whether it was the “castles” at Gorée, Cape Coast or El Mina, or a holding pen at some other less notorious place, African men, women, and children experienced the utter despair of being confined with hundreds of like souls in apprehension of unknown fates. Poor sanitation and ventilation, inadequate diets, and over-crowding compromised physical health even more.

The arrival of a ship brought relief from the holding cells, but onboard conditions hardly improved the health of enslaved people. The Atlantic crossing might be delayed as captains either waited for greater numbers to reach the coast or sailed to other ports in search of more captives. Once underway, diseases such as smallpox, fevers, and “the flux” (dysentery) often moved through the human cargo unchecked, devastating the population and reducing it sometimes by as much as 15 percent or higher. The sheer horror of it all led some to take their own lives. Others succumbed to what was called at the time “fixed melancholy” but which we now know was caused by dehydration and inadequate intake of food. Isaac Wilson, a surgeon on board the ship *Elizabeth*, described the condition as beginning with

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<sup>334</sup> The Middle Passage is addressed extensively in *Great Britain, House of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Sheila Lambert, vol. 82, 1791 and 1792.

lowness of spirits and despondency; refusing their proper nourishment ...at length the stomach gets weak, and incapable of digesting their food; fluxes and dysenteries ensue; and, from the weak and debilitated state of the patient, it soon carries him off.<sup>335</sup>

By the time they reached the Americas, many survivors would have experienced weeks, if not months, of debilitating conditions and would have been in a state akin to shock. How they fared in this next stage of enslavement would depend on the new disease environment into which they were thrust as well as the characteristics of the economy.

#### *10.4 Disease and Health in the West Indies*

Enslaved laborers who arrived in New York after having sojourned for a period of time in the West Indies would have been exposed to a variety of illnesses common to that environment. Diseases which affected them could be divided into seasonal types (that is, those determined by climate and weather conditions and by the environment in which they lived) and those that were chronic. Endemic illnesses were made worse by the physical, social, and economic conditions under which they lived—malnourishment, crowded quarters, long hours of labor, poorly constructed huts that opened to the elements and rested on damp and wet terrain, and lack of sanitary conditions in the compounds.

The physical condition of enslaved individuals can be gleaned from “slave lists,” which were kept by plantation managers and which provide detailed information on the health of each class of workers. The lists are instructive for the number of invalids and

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<sup>335</sup> Ibid., Testimony of Isaac Wilson , 72:574-75.

unhealthy individuals they identify.<sup>336</sup> Most of the skilled laborers such as drivers, carpenters and other artisans were listed as “able,” but coopers—perhaps because of their rigorous jobs—often appeared as “weakly” or “very weakly.” Infants who were too young to work were cited as being in good health, although many of them had yaws. Although most women were listed as being “healthy,” the journals recorded a significant number as “weakly” or “sickly.” For the most part, however, field workers were categorized as “able” or “healthy,” as were both boys and young girls.<sup>337</sup>

Examination of these lists reveals a host of diseases that afflicted the enslaved Africans. Among them was “cocobay,” an “utterly incurable” disease that was “peculiarly infectious among slaves” and likened to leprosy. Enslaved Africans were petrified of the disease and since it was determined to be incurable, they expelled all ailing members from the community, placing them in individual huts some distance away.<sup>338</sup>

New arrivals to the West Indian plantations were especially sensitive to the environmental changes they encountered there. Although they may have been accustomed to the intensity of the sun’s rays, “New Negroes” who were transported to the mountains (with its cooler, damper conditions) soon after their arrival often fell ill with “severe colds, pleurisies, fluxes, and other distempers.”<sup>339</sup> Many of the ailments that most often afflicted the newly arrived Africans proved fatal. This was especially so since

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<sup>336</sup> See, for instance, “A List of Negroes on Mesopotamia Estate, Jamaica,” and “A List of Slaves and Stock on Island Estate at Elizabeth,” Jamaica. Barham Family Papers, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

<sup>338</sup> J. Stewart, *A View of the Past and Present State of the Island of Jamaica with Remarks of the Moral and Physical Condition of Slaves in the Colonies*. (Edinburgh., 1823), 302.

<sup>339</sup> Edward Long, “The History of Jamaica”, vol. 2, fol. 354a.

many of those imported into the islands came from the Gold Coast or from parts of Central Africa such as the ports of Luanda and Benguela, where inhabitants experienced relatively dry and hot conditions.

Compromised health related to environmental change also affected American-born Africans who may have been moved from “a South side to a North side parish.” This occurred in non-British colonies as well—in Spanish Santo Domingo, French Saint Domingue, and Dutch Netherlands Antilles. Even in the Spanish mainland colonies, Africans were not exempt. Many of the deaths recorded by the Spanish magistrates were related to sudden environmental change and disease. In Grand Colombia the government took the initiative to combat excessive fatality. It became customary for newly arrived Africans to be quarantined in order to avoid infecting the larger populations with their illnesses. It also served as a way of slowly integrating the new Africans into the different disease environment with minimal loss of life. In some instances, this quarantine would last for up to a year because of severe illness and trauma from the Middle Passage.<sup>340</sup>

Edward Long, a Jamaican planter, noted that the cool nights and mornings in Jamaica and the early morning routine of the enslaved Africans, especially those newly arriving from the continent, had a significant impact on their health. Long observed that

The Chillness of the morning air in this island seems to cast a damp upon their spirits, and renders them for a time feeble and torpid; one sees them creeping slowly out of their huts, bundled up with thick clothing, shivering, and uneasy; but as the day advances, they grow more and more active and alert....They love warmth in the night, and never sleep without a fire in their hut; the watchman too, in the open air, lay themselves upon a board, by a rousing fire, and sometimes so near, as to scorch their very skins.<sup>341</sup>

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<sup>340</sup> William Frederick Sharp. *Slavery on the Spanish Frontier: The Colombian Choco, 1680-1810* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978), 112.

<sup>341</sup> Edward Long Papers, fol. 325b.

Enslaved Africans in the Caribbean also suffered from yaws. James McTear, a medical practitioner, described yaws as primarily a childhood illness, although it also affected young adults. In his estimation, yaws posed the greatest threat to those in the population who suffered from malnutrition and weakness:

The disease almost always leaves a train of secondary symptoms behind it, which are never got rid of in life. These are swellings in the feet, pains in the bones etc. which, generally act as the bringers on of other diseases and shorten life in one way or another.... The negroes have a notion that this complaint preserves the constitution from others of a more formidable nature.<sup>342</sup>

The reaction of enslaved Africans in the Caribbean to outbreaks of yaws infections was to treat it as small pox and to inoculate their children.<sup>343</sup>

Tuberculosis or consumption, *mal d'estomac*, fluxes or dysentery and inflammation of the bowels, further compromised the health and endangered the lives of enslaved people. The environment in which they lived was the ideal spawning ground for the bacteria and viruses that caused many diseases, especially as it contaminated food and water. Moreover, food shortages at times forced the enslaved to eat unripened fruits and immature vegetables, such as young yams.<sup>344</sup> When such foods were not cooked properly, amebic and bacillary dysentery and fluxes became major killers on plantations and in enslaved communities in urban centers.<sup>345</sup>

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<sup>342</sup> James McTear, "A Practical View of the Present State of Slavery in the West Indies," McTear Journal, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, MMC 2584.

<sup>343</sup> Ibid; see also Selwyn H. H Carrington, "An Assessment of the Epidemiological and Demographic Issues Involving Slave Societies in the Eighteenth Century" [unpublished paper].

<sup>344</sup> Barritt to Phillips, 15 December 1789, National Library of Wales, Slebech, MS 8345.

<sup>345</sup> Stewart, *The Island of Jamaica*, 306.

Children and young adults were especially susceptible to certain diseases. The buildings in which children were born and the conditions under which they passed the first few days of life lessened their chances for survival. Such places were often open and damp, and because they were devoid of bedding, the newborn lay on bare boards or on “bass mats.” The most prevalent childhood disease was *Trismus Nacentium* or lockjaw (jaw-fall in the local parlance). In the opinion of one contemporary, the disease developed from “the retention of the meconium by not keeping the infant sufficiently warm; or by giving it rum, and ailment of hard digestion.”<sup>346</sup> The cause of the high mortality rate among newborn children was also blamed on the African midwives and doctors. McTear wrote that the “preposterous treatment of the infants, their improper ligature of the fuvis, and the load of burnt stuff which they apply to it, together with their keeping the infant almost smothered with heat and clothes, are, I have no doubt the main cause of exciting trismus.”<sup>347</sup>

While lockjaw was chiefly blamed for deaths among very young children of one to nine days old, worms (including hookworms, round worms, tapeworms and Guinea worms) were the perennial killers of children and young adults and were thought to be the most destructive of diseases.<sup>348</sup> Worms entered the body in several different ways. The hookworm, for instance, usually penetrated the skin in the area of the feet.

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<sup>346</sup> Long, “History of Jamaica”. British Library, Add MS. 12,404, fol. 354d.

<sup>347</sup> “Practical View of Slavery,” McTear Journal.

<sup>348</sup> Long, “History of Jamaica,” British Library, Add. MS. 12, 404, fol. 354d.



Communities of enslaved people, with their poor sanitation, dirt environment, and dampness, were ideal breeding grounds for disease.

Aside from environmental factors, diet played a critical role in determining the health of enslaved Africans. Generally, laborers had access to a variety of foods, including “pulse, herbs, plantains, maize, yams...pork and fish, fresh or salt; salted beef, herrings, jerked hog, or fowls.”<sup>349</sup> Yet, provisioning was a constant problem. The British West Indies depended heavily on North American supplies for the provisioning of their enslaved workforce, importing 19,000 quintals of the refuse quality of codfish from New England annually.<sup>350</sup>

Diet often facilitated the growth of hookworm larvae. The presence of hookworms was detected from one of many symptoms which included “an enormous appetite, extreme lethargy, generalized swelling, and retarded mental, physical, and, among children, sexual growth.”<sup>351</sup> Worms also produced anemia in the afflicted and were associated with geophagy, or dirt-eating, a practice engaged in by children as well as by adults.<sup>352</sup> Geophagy was common among enslaved persons in the Americas and likely reflected the effort to satisfy some nutritional deficiency.<sup>353</sup> In an effort to relieve

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<sup>349</sup> Long Papers, British Library, Add MS, fols., 325b-326a.

<sup>350</sup> Edmund Burke, *An Account of the European Settlements in America* (London: R. & J. Dodsley, 1757), 167-68.

<sup>351</sup> Richard Sheridan, *Doctors and Slaves: A Medical and Demographic History of Slavery in the British West Indies, 1680-1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 216

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, 217

<sup>353</sup> John M. Hunter, “Geophagy in Africa and in the United States: A Culture-Nutrition Hypothesis,” *Geographical Review*, 63 (April, 1973).

the economic pressure of importing food, West Indian plantation managers allowed enslaved workers plots of land on which to grow their own provisions. In theory, the laborers were permitted 26 days of free time per annum in which they could work in their gardens. In practice, however, most of them received approximately two weeks in which to cultivate their provision grounds. Crop-time—immediately after Christmas to June or July—coincided with the most important period in provision production. Planting provisions consumed a great deal of time between April and June, when the young plants needed to be nurtured to take full advantage of the rainy season.

Illness and other factors which compromised health influenced the level of fecundity as well.<sup>354</sup> Those whose labor was the least intense reproduced the best. Enslaved African women who worked more intensely, such as those on the sugar estates, experienced difficulty in becoming pregnant and avoiding miscarriage.<sup>355</sup> The rampant contraction of venereal disease was also damaging to fertility. The contraction of various strains of the disease caused many to seek the “modern” medicine of that time to cure their plight. The medicines were meant either to “. . . repel, or carry off the virus,” but frequently it killed the fetus and sterilized both men and women.<sup>356</sup>

Years of exposure to the West Indian disease environment stripped the Africans of the beauty that even Edward Long and other planters had backhandedly conceded to

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<sup>354</sup> See Henry Goulburn to Samson, 3 August 1813, Goulburn Papers, Acc. 119/51, Surry Record Office, Kingston-Upon-Thames (England).

<sup>355</sup> Long Papers, fol. 358.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 354b. Contemporaries concluded, however, that disease may have been less a factor in reducing fertility than the attitudes of women toward child-rearing. Joseph Barham argued that Africans were “highly unfavorable to natural increase. The sexes live almost in common together and the females avoid child bearing by every means in their power... The more the existence of their master depends on

their enslaved laborers. Long had written of the “chrystalline humour of the Eyes, which as well as the teeth gives some degree of variety by their whiteness & lustre...a

smoothness and glossiness of the skin...” But at the end of their lives, he observed,

even these few ornaments are diminished as they advance in years, and vanish at the approach of old age; at this period their eye balls are generally bleared, their teeth yellow, or decayed, & their skin wrinkled, collapsed and rough; so that nothing in human shape can possess the attributes of ugliness in greater perfection than a superannuated negro.<sup>357</sup>

Indeed, by the end of the eighteenth century, high percentages of superannuated individuals populated the plantations of the West Indies. The incidence of disease compounded the problem, and the number of able bodied workers, according to one report, consisted of a “very small number not half of the whole – with so weak a gang much Revenue cannot be expected.”<sup>358</sup>

### *10.5 Disease and Health in New York*

Physical well-being among enslaved laborers in New York was compromised at the outset, as workers arrived in the city under great disadvantage. Occasionally, they succumbed to the rigors of sea passage (be it transatlantic or by way of the West Indies) within days of debarkation. Abraham Lynesen’s two newly purchased enslaved laborers, for instance, “were so very weak when brought on shoar that in a few days they dyed under the Doctors hands.”<sup>359</sup> Arriving laborers routinely were examined for evidence of

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their procreation of children the more they seek to defeat it.” See Joseph Barham, “Increased Population” (1832). Bodl. MS. Clarendon dep. C.428. Bodleian Library, Oxford.

<sup>357</sup> Long Papers, Add MS. Africans and their descendants were normally superannuated at 50 years old.

<sup>358</sup> See James Laing to N.W. Senior, 5 September 1786, N. L. W. Nassau-Senior Papers, E61; Henry W. Plummer to Joseph Foster Barham, 10 June 1789. MS. Clarendon dep. C. 357/B2; Dickson, *Mitigation of Slavery*, 33-34; Hibbert, Hall & Fuhr to Smyth, 15 May 1790, Woolnough Papers, Ac/Wo 6 (27) 142 (a), Bristol Colonial Record Office.

<sup>359</sup> Parish Transcripts (Colonial State Papers—America and West Indies), filed chronologically, 22 September 1725, 20, fol. 159 (1720-38), New York Historical Society.

smallpox and other infectious diseases, and sale did not take place until the buyer was convinced of the soundness of his purchase. Such inspections often uncovered less than healthy cargo. Such was the case in 1726, when the captain of the sloop *Anne*, arriving from the coast of Guinea, was charged with having imported “52 [enslaved Africans] the greater part whereof being sick and in a weak condition, that (after having been at a considerable charge in clothing victualing nursing and physicking them) fourteen of them dyed”<sup>360</sup>

Frequently, purchasers of enslaved people remained unaware of illnesses until long after finalizing the sale, as John Van Solingen discovered when he bought an enslaved woman from Benjamin D’Harriette in 1730. Van Solingen brought suit against D’Harriette when the African woman who had been sold as sound subsequently required treatment that included “divrs druggs, medicine plasters, poultases, physick, eye water and eye salve...for a certain malignant distemper or disease commonly called or known by the name of Yaws.”<sup>361</sup> In a similar case, the owner of an enslaved woman named Judy complained in 1737 that the laborer was “lame in shoulder, impotent and unsound and infirm and afflicted and troubled with great weakness and divers distempers, diseases, pains and ailments and altogether unable and unfit to work”.<sup>362</sup> The frequency with which Africans arrived in the city either ill, superannuated or “unfit to work” led the House of Assembly to declare:

Whereas it may happen that of the negroes or other slaves which shall be imported into this colony some are so sick that they are

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<sup>360</sup> Ibid., 20 April, 1726.

<sup>361</sup> Select Cases of the Mayor’s Court, New York City Mayor’s Court Records, 350, 364-66 and 368.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid.

more likely to dye than live Be It Enacted that all such slave or slaves as shall depart this life within 30 days after importation or landing shall be exempted from the duty aforesaid provided proof be made upon oath before the treasurer of this colony that such slave or slaves dyed within the time above limited after the landing or importation thereof and that they were sick at the time they were landed.<sup>363</sup>

Even if they survived passage relatively unscathed, enslaved laborers faced conditions likely to compromise their health. New York's winters, especially, greatly affected new arrivals. Peter Kalm, a Swedish visitor to the city in the mid-eighteenth century observed that

It has frequently been found, that the negroes cannot stand the cold here so well as the Europeans or whites; for while the latter are not in the least affected by the cold, the toes and fingers of the former are frequently frozen...The frost easily hurts the hands or feet of the negroes who come from Africa, or occasions violent pains in their whole body...<sup>364</sup>

John Van Cortlandt, New York merchant and owner of the slaving vessel *Mattey*, echoed this sentiment. When the captain of the vessel sent word to Van Cortlandt that he was having difficulty selling his cargo of captives at Barbados, the merchant instructed the captain to leave for New York immediately in order to avoid coming “late upon the Coast which will be of bad consiquence to the naked Slaves and many will perish.”<sup>365</sup>

In addition to the climate, there was little to recommend the daily living conditions of enslaved people in colonial New York. The compact pattern of settlement within the

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<sup>363</sup> Parish Transcripts, “Duty on Negroes,” 1728, 4.

<sup>364</sup> *Peter Kalm’s Travels in North America*), 1:207.

<sup>365</sup> Samuel McKee, *Labor in Colonial New York, 1664-1776* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Ira J. Friedman, Inc., 1935), 118.

city precluded a spacious and disease-free environment and subjected residents—enslaved and free—to epidemics. New York Africans struggled to survive in the most austere accommodations. Owners typically lodged their laborers in the least desirable spaces of their homes—lofts and attics, cellars and kitchens—where they suffered severely from the damp, dark, drafty, alternating heat and cold of the rooms. Those fortunate enough to have their own rooms were usually lodged on a separate floor above the rest of the household.<sup>366</sup> Many, however, were lodged in the “Negro Kitchens.” Such structures—whether shared with one or two others in the household or inhabited by a single laborer—denied to the enslaved the personal space that might have ameliorated their condition.<sup>367</sup>

The quality and quantity of their diet further limited the ability of enslaved New York Africans to enjoy good health. We get some sense of that diet from the narrative of John Jea, who had been born in Old Calabar (West Africa) in 1773. Jea had been brought with his parents and siblings to New York when he was two-and-a half years old. His Dutch owners fed the family a mixture of the following:

Indian corn pounded or bruised and boiled with water...and about a quart of sour buttermilk poured on it; for one person two quarts of this mixture, and about three ounces of dark bread, per day, the bread was darker than that usually allowed to convicts, and greased over with very indifferent hog’s lard.<sup>368</sup>

On rare occasions, “when he was better pleased,” Jea’s owner gave him a week’s

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<sup>366</sup> Davis, “These Enemies of Their Own Household,” 135.

<sup>367</sup> Fear of fires from cooking food persuaded owners to establish these separate kitchens where their laborers could be lodged as well.

<sup>368</sup> “The Life, History and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher,” in *Pioneers of the Black Atlantic: Five Slave Narratives from the Enlightenment, 1772-1815*, edited by Henry Louis Gates and William L. Andrews (Washington, D.C.: Civitas, 1998), 369.

allowance of half a pound of beef and half a gallon of potatoes.

While a variety of foods were available in the city, fresh meats were scarce and vegetables seasonal. As Jea's account suggests, enslaved people subsisted on diets abundant in corn and other cereal grains. Samp and samp porridge, a staple of the diet of non-elite New Yorkers from the earliest days, consisted of Indian corn that had been coarsely ground in a mortar. The resulting food product was either boiled alone or mixed with salt beef or pork and vegetables.<sup>369</sup> Suppawn (corn meal and milk porridge) also enjoyed popularity among New Yorkers. Some indication of what was considered an adequate working-class diet is provided by data on maintenance of the poor. The poorhouse bill of fare adopted in 1736 included bread and beer, milk porridge, or beef broth and bread for breakfast; pork and peas porridge or fish and peas porridge for dinner; and bread and cheese, "sappaan" and milk, or beef broth and bread for supper.<sup>370</sup> Both men and women would have had the opportunity to supplement this diet, to the extent that they could move about the town and barter or earn money to purchase food outright. But such opportunities often depended upon happenstance and did not provide the certainty enslaved people needed.

The quality and quantity of clothing available to New York Africans also affected health. The range and extent of wardrobe varied with individual owners, the season, and the ingenuity of the enslaved.<sup>371</sup> In general, men possessed breeches, shirt, jacket, and

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<sup>369</sup> Alice Morse Earle, *Colonial Days in Old New York* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1896), 129-30. According to Earle, the corn to make samp was often ground by the enslaved Africans.

<sup>370</sup> Minutes of the Justices, Church Wardens, and Vestrymen of New York City, 1694-1747, (3 June 1736), New York Public Library.

<sup>371</sup> Runaway advertisements attest to the variety of attire available and the individualism permitted by one's own personal style. Enslaved women even adopted the style of the era of wearing hooped petticoats. See Thomas DeVoe, *The Market Book* (New York, 1860).

cap while women wore skirt, petticoat, blouse, and hat. Both wore “negro shoes”, but it is likely that most wore them primarily during the colder months.<sup>372</sup> Some individual laborers enjoyed a wardrobe beyond the general fare, acquired either by the largess of their owners or as a consequence of their own devices, sometimes through pilfering. It was under the latter circumstances that eighteen-year-old Hannah was punished when she stole “as much Bristol Stuff as would make her a Gown and Pettycoat and also a Solk Muslin handkerchief and a Small piece of Callicoe” that could be sewn into clothing. Hannah contended that she had no choice since she was “almost Naked and her mistress would give her no Clothes.”<sup>373</sup> While perhaps not representative of the general attire available to enslaved people, the clothing Cesar carried with him when he absconded from John Moor, a New York merchant, attests to the resolve of New York Africans to dress well. Included in his wardrobe were

several suits of Cloaths, viz., Two Comblet Coats, one brown, the other whitish; also, an old home-spun Coat; Two Suits of ozenbrigs Jackets and Breeches; one pair of Leather Breeches, good Stockins and Shoes, a good Hat, and some Shirts.<sup>374</sup>

Sub-standard accommodations, poor diet (including the possibility of contaminated food and water), and clothing which proved inadequate for harsh New York winters contributed to the susceptibility to disease and illness of the city’s enslaved population. Exposure to certain infectious diseases such as smallpox, yellow fever, diphtheria,

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<sup>372</sup> Charles Nicolls Ledger, 1759-1765, and Account Book, 1753-1760. Nicolls Mss. New-York Historical Society. Storeowner Nicoll supplied twice as many new or repaired shoes to his clients who purchased shoes for their enslaved laborers during the colder months as during the warmer. See also Foote, “Black Life in Colonial Manhattan,” 144.

<sup>373</sup> Goodfriend, *Before the Melting Pot*, 122.

<sup>374</sup> Advertisement appearing in the *New York Gazette*, August 12 to 19, 1728.



influenza, and measles was common, and newspaper advertisements were replete with attempts to reassure potential buyers of enslaved labor that the person offered for sale “has had the Small-Pox.”<sup>375</sup> Several epidemics swept through New York during the eighteenth century—a smallpox outbreak in 1702, 1745-47, 1752, and 1756-57; yellow fever in 1702 and again in 1743; measles in 1729 and 1788; and outbreaks of various other diseases throughout the century. It is uncertain how many New York Africans were affected, but presumably they, like other poor people, bore the brunt of such epidemics.<sup>376</sup> Inoculations (before arrival in the city or at the beginning of an outbreak) may have mitigated the effects of some smallpox epidemics, but their use on the African community by slaveholders would have depended on the willingness of owners to experiment with valuable property.

There was considerably more danger from day-to-day conditions than those posed by epidemics. For instance, enslaved people, like other New Yorkers, were susceptible to poisonings resulting from the consumption of various liquids and foods. One such danger involved the use of pewter containers. Connoting its owner’s high status, pewter was used widely in the city. Although its cost may have been beyond the financial reach of enslaved and free blacks, recorded illnesses among food preparers in other parts of the Americas suggest that they may have been suffering from contaminated

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<sup>375</sup> See for example *New York Gazette*, October 8 to October 15, 1733, and *New York Weekly Journal*, April 15, 1734.

<sup>376</sup> John Duffy, *A History of Public Health in New York City* (1968), 58-59. See also his *Epidemics in Colonial America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1953). Extant records suggest, however, that there was an underreporting of smallpox cases involving New York’s African population. See *The New York Gazette*, August 23-30 through December 13-21, 1731.

leftovers stored in pewter dishes or larger storage objects seamed with lead.<sup>377</sup>

Storage vats and the tools used in the manufacturing of alcoholic drinks were likely as well to have been made of pewter similar to distilleries in Jamaica and Barbados. Pewter in distilleries caused lead poisoning, which in eighteenth-century medical circles was known as plumbism and dry gripes. The consumption of tainted rum caused great sickness among Caribbean and New York City populations, particularly when taking into consideration the drinking habits of eighteenth-century workers. A contemporary described the fondness for drink as follows:

As he walks out In the morning he takes what is called a small glass (half a gill) of bitters, gin, or something of the sort, at the first grog shop he passes; and commonly takes a second whet...before he gets to work. Generally he takes two more of these small glasses of raw and clear stuff...as he returns home to get his breakfast. Thus a half pint is disposed of before eight o'clock A.M.<sup>378</sup>

Other dangers from distilled alcohol lurked in the spirits sold by local merchants. In 1750, Gerardus Beekman indicated to a potential buyer of rum: "I have Examined the Cask of Rum Left in my Store and am Some what affaird that my Negro fellow has filled up the Cask Rum Sent You with the wrong Spirits if he has it cannot Alter the Quality or test much, however it is not so good as you Expected..." "New rum" that is under-aged liquor was a great cause of illness in Jamaica and by extension, New York since it was also imported into the city. Jerome Handler has written of its lingering symptoms which, without treatment, frequently led to an untimely death in otherwise healthy individuals.

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<sup>377</sup> See Jerome S. Handler et al., "Lead Contact and Poisoning in Barbados Slaves: Historical, Chemical and Biological Evidence." *Social Science History* 10 (4), (1986), 399-425.

<sup>378</sup> Howard Rock, *The New York City Artisan, 1789-1825: A Documentary History* (New York: New York University Press, 1989).

This debilitating illness likely affected black men in New York since there were instances of black and white laborers being routinely supplied with alcohol. For instance, an invoice submitted by William Dudgale details the expenses incurred in preparation of an execution. The invoice preparer claims to have “Paid negro hire, cartage, hire of ladders, ropes...with liquor to carpenter and negros....”<sup>379</sup> Similarly, when the City Ferry House was under repair, John Deane submitted a bill for expenses that included the labor of at least four black men, two of whom were known as “Negroe Ben and Negroe Roben.” Aside from the wages the men received, there was a charge for “Liquor at Sundry times for all the workmen.”<sup>380</sup>

Not least of the factors affecting the health of enslaved people was the toll taken by strenuous and repetitive labor (as Chapter 8 of this report suggests). Dock work, portage, farming, and other manual jobs that involved heavy lifting and the bearing of weighty objects on the head and shoulders would have produced stress to the body and compromised health. Even the daily routines of domestics (such as carrying water into the house) and the repetitive motions of those women who worked at spinning and weaving exposed them to injury. Such injuries as are found in the African Burial Ground population provide the physical evidence of the consequences of exposure to hard labor.<sup>381</sup>

As was the custom of the day, medical care for enslaved blacks (and for most people) likely traumatized the body as much as the disease. Standard treatments in

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<sup>379</sup> Unfiled Papers of the Common Council, Municipal Archives of New York.

<sup>380</sup> Ibid.

<sup>381</sup> Report of the Skeletal Biology Component, chap. 10.

colonial New York (and throughout the colonies) consisted of purgings of the body through the inducement of bleeding, vomiting, sweating and evacuating the bowel. Doctors dressed cuts and other wounds and dispensed drugs that would have the desired purgative effect. The treatment of Jupiter, an enslaved laborer owned by the Lloyd family of Long Island, is indicative of the nature of medical treatment available to enslaved Africans similarly situated in New York. Dr. George Muirson diagnosed the “Pains in [Jupiter’s] Leggs, Knees, and Thighs, ascending to his Bowels” as “a Gouty Rumatick Disorder.” Muirson directed that the man receive:

...one of the Purges, In the morning fasting, and att night one of the boluses, the next day take away about 12 or 14 ounces of blood (notwithstanding he lost blood in the winter) from the foot will be the most Serviceable, a day or two after as You find his Strength will bear It, Give the Other Purge, and the bolus Att night. On those days he Doth not Purge, and Bleed, Give one of the powders In the morning And another In the Evening, mixt in some Diet Drink, made with Equal Parts of Horse Redish Roots, The Bark of Elder Roots, Pine Budds, or the Second Bark, wood or Toad Sorrel, make It Strong With the Ingredient; and Lett him Drink Constantly of It, for a Month, or Six weeks and then the Remainder of the Summer let him Have milch whey to drink, he must live on a Thin Spare Diet, abstaining from meat att nights all Spirituous Liquors, Salt, pepper, and Vinegar. Have sent some oyntment to be Used as he did the former...<sup>382</sup>

Such aggressive treatment could have rendered the enslaved person debilitated and incapable of labor, if it did not take his life.

A pharmacist’s day book that records the treatment of blacks over the course of a single year suggests that at least some enslaved people received a degree of medical help for their ailments. From the treatment indicated, it would appear that they suffered from

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<sup>382</sup> Papers of the Lloyd Family of Lloyd’s Neck, New York, *Collections*, New York Historical Society, 1926-7, 1:309-10.

a variety of ills, including worms and other parasites, fever, and abrasions.<sup>383</sup> For instance, the journal had numerous entries that recorded “dressings for yr. Negro.” In fact, treatment for wounds was the most frequent entry, followed by purging and blood-letting.

Even under the best of circumstances, eighteenth-century New York was an inhospitable place for its inhabitants. This was especially so for those relegated to the poorest living conditions and subjected to the harshest labor. The African Burial Ground population, with its preponderance of children and younger adults, confirms the short-lived, substandard existence that enslaved and free blacks endured in the colonial city.

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<sup>383</sup> “Day Book, April 26, 1743 - April 9, 1744 of an unidentified N.Y.C. Physician.” New York Historical Society. See also Joel and Shahnaz Montague, “The Day Book of a New York Physician-Pharmacist, 1743.” *Pharmacy in History*, 23(1981).

## 11.0 “By the Visitations of God:”<sup>384</sup> *Death, Burial, and the Affirmation of Humanity*

### 11.1 *Introduction*

Given the living conditions, work demands, and exposure to serious infectious diseases in eighteenth-century New York, there is little wonder why death was ever-present among the enslaved and free black population. Because the municipality did not record deaths in the eighteenth century, one is left to rely on extant church documents that record burials. But even these sources are of limited use for determining the rate of mortality for people of African descent in the city, since the data pertains overwhelmingly to the white community. Anecdotal information is provided by statistics for periods of epidemic. In a six-week period that coincided with the 1731 smallpox outbreak, for instance, the city witnessed 50 burials of blacks, representing 3.2 per cent of that population.<sup>385</sup> The figure may reflect an under-reporting since white burials were calculated at 4.4 per cent of the total white population.<sup>386</sup>

The deaths of persons legally defined as property placed the responsibility for “disposal” of the remains on the owners. As a member of a household (albeit a subordinate one), deceased Africans might expect that the basic necessities of burial would be supplied by those who had held them to labor. As with everything else in slavery, the notion of responsibility varied with the individual. The day book of cabinetmaker Joshua Delaplaine suggests that some owners at least supplied coffins for their laborers. During the period recorded by the day book, Delaplaine filled 13 orders

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<sup>384</sup> This phrase was commonly used in colonial New York to define death from natural causes.

<sup>385</sup> Michael L. Blakey et al., “Biocultural Approaches to the Health and Demography of Africans in Colonial New York.” Unpublished paper presented at the 14<sup>th</sup> Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, Williamsburg, Virginia, July 28, 1998.

<sup>386</sup> Ibid.

for coffins for the burial of Africans, most (if not all) of whom presumably were enslaved. The deceased persons included men, women, and children.<sup>387</sup>

The few pieces of evidence available concerning black burials suggest that white participation in black mortuary practices ended with the furnishing of a coffin. Indeed, Chaplain Sharpe had claimed that New York Africans were buried “by those of their own country and complexion without the office...the Heathenish rites... performed at the grave by their countrymen.”<sup>388</sup> David Valentine also suggested that graveside rites and rituals followed the practices that Africans had brought with them:

The negroes in this city were, both in the Dutch and English colonial times, a proscribed and detested race, having nothing in common with the whites. Many of them were native Africans, imported hither in slave ships, and retaining their native superstitions and burial customs, among which was that of burying at night, with various mummeries and outcries...<sup>389</sup>

The nature of those “Heathenish rites” and “mummeries and outcries” can perhaps be discerned by considering the burial practices of eighteenth-century Africans.

### *11.2 African Mortuary Customs in the Eighteenth Century*

As in the seventeenth century, burial customs in Africa were influenced by religious beliefs, be they Islamic, Catholic, or traditional. Hence, in West and West Central Africa, practices varied widely. Among the Wolof of the Senegambia, the deceased was wrapped in a shroud and taken outside the village to a cemetery and placed in an uncovered trench. The funeral group surrounded the trench with earthen walls to

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<sup>387</sup> The Day Book of Joshua Delaplaine, 1753-1756. Joshua Delaplaine Papers, New York Historical Society.

<sup>388</sup> Sharpe, 13:355.

<sup>389</sup> Valentine, *Manual of the Corporation of New York*, 567.

protect it from intrusion by animals.<sup>390</sup> In the Sierra-Leone-Liberia region, the coastal people (for whom there are descriptions) wrapped the deceased in a clean white cotton sheet, placed them upon a bier, and carried them to the place of burial, which typically was located far outside the village. Such ceremonies took place in either the morning or the evening.<sup>391</sup> Interment followed a simple ceremony, without any grave goods. The grave itself was decorated on the surface with expensive mats.<sup>392</sup>

Gold Coast mortuary practices provided that the body be interred either wrapped in a shroud or placed in a coffin, which became increasingly common in the eighteenth century.<sup>393</sup> In some instances the deceased was interred wearing clothes and jewelry such as beads and local monetary objects. An interrogation of the corpse for signs of the involvement of witchcraft in the death might precede interment.<sup>394</sup> Objects reminiscent of the person's life, such as tools, were placed on the grave, as was clay representation of the deceased, often painted red and white. These would be washed and cared for by the living for some time afterwards.<sup>395</sup> In the eighteenth century people were much more likely to be buried in the house where they lived, often in the room where they died.

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<sup>390</sup> Chambonneau, "L'Origine," in Ritchie, "Deux textes," 319-20.

<sup>391</sup> Oldendorp, *Histoire*, 381. Oldendorp's informants told him that in the Kanga country burials took place in the evening.

<sup>392</sup> Matthews, *Voyage*, 122-25.

<sup>393</sup> Willem Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea* (London, 1705; reprint 1967), 227-32 (Original *Naauwkeurige beschryving van de Guinese Goud-Tand- en Slave-Kust* (Utrecht, 1704); Rømer, *Tilforladelig*, 243-4; Paul Erdmann Isert, *Reise nach Guinea und den Caribaischen Inseln in Columbien in Briefen als seine Freunde beschreiben* (Copenhagen, 1788), English trans. With pagination of original, tr. Selena Axelrod Winsnes, *Letters on West Africa and the Slave Trade. Paul Erdmann Isert's Journey to Guinea and the Caribbean Islands in Columbia (1788)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 219-20; Oldendorp, *Histoire*, 388-89.

<sup>394</sup> Oldendorp, *Histoire*, 388-9.

<sup>395</sup> Thomas Thompson, *An Account of Two Missionary Voyages...the one to New Jersey..the..other...to the coast of Guiney* (London, 1758), 45.



Such treatment had been reserved for especially important people in earlier times.

Inhabitants of the Bight of Benin also tended to bury their dead in the house where the deceased lived, there being no separate cemeteries. Among the Popo, interment followed after the body was wrapped in a white cloth, while Fon speakers (including Dahomians) dressed their dead in clothing supplied by neighbors. Few grave goods were left at the site, but mourners sacrificed a bird and placed a large pot of water in the grave.<sup>396</sup>

Early eighteenth-century accounts of burials in the coastal city states of the Niger Delta region describe the dead as being cleaned and then smoked to preserve them. Subsequently, they were wrapped in white cotton, placed in a tightly fitted coffin, and buried under the house where the deceased had lived.<sup>397</sup> Similarly, Oldendorp's informants told him that the Igbos buried those of noble birth under houses after washing them and wrapping them in white cotton cloth, believing that the soul of the deceased would soon possess a newborn of the same dwelling or nearby.<sup>398</sup> In describing the burial of a woman in his country, however, Equiano indicated that her tomb was a small thatched hut under which her body rested.<sup>399</sup> Offerings of food and drink were placed on top of the structure. The dead, he described, were buried after being washed and ornamented. Grave goods consisted primarily of "their implements and things of value," which included tobacco and pipes. Interrogation to determine witchcraft or foul play in

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<sup>396</sup> Barbot, *Guinea*, 640; Oldendorp, *Histoire*, 412, 415.

<sup>397</sup> Bosman, *New and Accurate Description*, 448; also Oldendorp, *Histoire*, 429.

<sup>398</sup> Oldendorp, *Histoire*, 435.

<sup>399</sup> Equiano, 78.

the death of the deceased might be a feature of the trip to the grave.<sup>400</sup>

Eighteenth-century West Central Africans continued to follow the practices common in the seventeenth century, in many instances blending Christian rituals with traditional African customs. Among Africans from the Dembos and the Kimbundu-speaking areas, for example, burials showed many traces of local practices. An eighteenth-century European description of such funerals, called *entambes* (entambos) indicated that they contained “abominable superstitions” where “fetishers join in the most devout and serious rites of Christianity.”<sup>401</sup>

In West Central African regions where the state was much more loosely organized than the Kongo and whose leaders had not converted to Christianity despite their intense interaction with Europeans, burial practices exhibited decidedly traditional customs. A Loango man reported to Oldendorp that prior to interment the corpse was left upright so that the body would be drained of all liquid while it decayed. Friends who visited left behind cloth that the family used to wrap the body, giving it the appearance of a barrel. They then placed the body on a bier, laid it in a box made of grass, and positioned it in the grave.<sup>402</sup>

Oldendorp provides additional evidence concerning burial practices in areas distant from Loango, where the population also followed indigenous mortuary customs. The Loango informant told him of certain Africans in the area whom Oldendorp identified as “black Jews” who buried their dead far away in a “walled” grave. These

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<sup>400</sup> Equiano, 78, 80-1.

<sup>401</sup> Correia, *História* 1, 87-89.

<sup>402</sup> Oldendorf, *Histoire*, 439-440.

“black Jews” carried calabashes that they painted all over with colorful designs, which sometimes represented a snake or humorous scenes.<sup>403</sup>

Mondongo people who resided in the interior retained bodies for four weeks before burial. During this time, friends and relatives of the deceased drank and ate next to him. At the end of this four-week period, the friends wrapped the body in cloth made from the inner bark of a special tree and put the body and grave goods in a vaulted tomb.<sup>404</sup>

### 11.3 *Burial Customs in the West Indies*

While we have limited evidence of the extent to which New York Africans drew on burial traditions that originated in Africa, information abounds for connections between African customs and West Indian practices. Those peoples from the West Indies who were destined for New York would have been intimately familiar with the customs of burial in Africa, since strength of numbers, absentee ownership, and the preponderance of the Africans born on the islands encouraged the retention of certain traditions. A key feature of those traditions was the belief that the ancestors intervened to safeguard the living from evil. This belief led to veneration of the dead; hence, every measure was taken to ensure that the departed relative had a proper burial. In fact, relatives guarded against the dismembering of the deceased person’s body in the belief that it might prevent

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<sup>403</sup> Oldendorp, *Histoire*, 443-444. Oldendorp identified these Africans as “Black Jews” because his informants told him that they had specialists who circumcised all young boys. They also kept the Sabbath, were ostracized by the other Africans, and were scattered about engaged in trade. Many West Central Africans practiced circumcision, but the ones identified by Oldendorp also had taboos (food restrictions, for instance) that set them apart from their neighbors. The presence of Jewish customs among Africans in the coastal regions of West central Africa should come as no surprise, since there were many Portuguese Jews living and trading in Angola and the Kongo.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid.

transmigration to Africa. Care also had to be taken with the dead since their spirit could be reincarnated in an unborn child. The possibility of reincarnation gave rise to naming children after ancestors, as is evident from slave lists that exhibit the repetition of certain African names.

Burial customs differed slightly from island to island, but there are some general characteristics that can be identified. On those islands where the Christian church played a role in the lives of enslaved people, mourners adopted the practice of dressing in white and tolling the church-bell. The body was placed in a wooden coffin, which was then “covered with a sheet, by the way of a pall.”<sup>405</sup> One observer reported that the coffin bearers performed the “reel” while others danced. They also continuously spoke to the deceased imploring him “to go in orderly manner to the place of interment” and promising that God would punish those who had done them ill (see Figure 11.1).<sup>406</sup> In Jamaica, coffin bearers raised and lowered the coffin three times, a custom common among the Ashanti who comprised the dominant force in that island. Their influence was particularly noticeable in the religions practices of Jamaica.<sup>407</sup>

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<sup>405</sup> Luffman, *Notes on Antigua*, 112-113. See also Pinckard, *Notes on the West Indies*, 1: 130.

<sup>406</sup> Luffman, *Notes on Antigua*, 113.

<sup>407</sup> Joseph J. Williams, *Voodooos and Obeah: Phases of West Indian Witchcraft* (New York: Dial Press, 1932), 143.



**Figure 11.1: Divining the Cause of Death, an African Funeral Rite Practiced in Jamaica (from J. Phillip, *Jamaica: Its Past and Present State*, 1843).**

In Barbados mourners placed the deceased into a basket and then carefully emptied the body into the grave. Attending one such funeral, an observer wrote that the mourners

had full faith in Jenny's transmigration to meet her friends, at her place of nativity and their persuasion that death was only a removal from their present to their former home; a mere change from a state of slavery to a state of freedom; did not barely alleviate but wholly prevented the natural grief and affliction arising from the loss of a friend. They confidently expected to hear from poor Jenny, or to know her influence in the way they most desired, before morning.<sup>408</sup>

Hardly a solemn occasion, many enslaved people celebrated death as the deceased person's delivery from slavery. "Grief and lamentations" played no role in the service. "No solemn dirge was heard! No deep sounding bell was tolled: no fearful silence held. It seemed a period of mirth and joy! Instead of weeping and bewailing, the attendants jumped and sported, as they talked and laughed with each other in high festivity."<sup>409</sup>

In the spirit of celebration, family members and friends brought food and drink, which they prepared and consumed at the residential compound of the deceased. Visitations continued to the home for nine days, and on the ninth night, the family held a special prayer for the departed member.<sup>410</sup>

#### 11.4 *Burial Customs in New York*

Although documentary evidence provides little understanding of burial practices among African peoples in colonial New York, archaeological data offer glimpses of

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<sup>408</sup> Pinckard, 1:133.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid., 1:133-134.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid.

prevailing customs. The study reveals, for instance, a cemetery whose burials are remarkably uniform, with more than 90 percent of the remains placed in coffins,



**Figure 11.2: Interment in the African Burial Ground would have been carried out by members of the African community (Illustration by Michael Colbert, 2004).**

shrouded, and laid out with head-to-west orientation.<sup>411</sup> All were placed on their backs and most were individual burials. This sameness suggests that the ethnically diverse Africans shared agreed-upon traditions that had been created by drawing on the similarities of many African customs and adapting to the circumstances they found in New York.

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<sup>411</sup> "Draft Report of the Archaeology Component of the African Burial Ground Project," eds, Warren Perry and Jean Howson, June 2004, chap. 5.

Although the deceased were laid to rest in a manner not unlike that of white New Yorkers, certain items of material culture point to an African cultural continuum. For instance, several members of the burial ground population are interred with beads. The configurations they wore included necklaces, waist beads, and wristlets; and they adorned the bodies of men, women, and children.<sup>412</sup> In many African societies, beads hold ceremonial significance at every stage of life: at birth, puberty, initiation, marriage, procreation, old age, death, and finally entry into the community of ancestors and spirits. For the living, they provide protection against evil, guard against bad fortune, and connote wealth, status, and fertility (when worn around the waist) of the wearer. The presence of beads indicates the important expressive role they continued to play in the lives and death of New York Africans.<sup>413</sup>

Shells also have significance in an African mortuary context, reflecting the belief that they “enclose the soul’s immortal presence.”<sup>414</sup> In an African American context, they are a metaphor for water:

The shells stand for the sea. The sea brought us, the sea shall take us back. So the shells upon our graves stand for water, the means of glory and the land of demise.<sup>415</sup>

Archaeologists recovered more than 200 shells at the African Burial Ground; most represented grave fill, but several apparently had been placed inside the coffin or on the

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<sup>412</sup> Ibid., chap. 10.

<sup>413</sup> Edna Greene Medford et al., “The Transatlantic Slave Trade to New York City: Sources and Routing of Captives.” (unpublished paper)

<sup>414</sup> Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 135.

<sup>415</sup> Ibid., 135.



lid. The presence of shells suggest the continuation, in at least some form, of African spirituality and burial customs.<sup>416</sup>

Laws provide additional clues to mortuary practices and the attempt of Europeans to shape and to control African customs. A 1722 law, for instance, suggests that New York Africans buried their dead at night, a practice that likely reflected the difficulty of finding time during the day to engage in sacred practices. In any case, night burials with their attending “mummeries and outcries” alarmed owners who feared that the potential for conspiracy existed. Hence, the council passed a law to regulate the burial of “all Negroes and Indian Slaves that shall dye within this corporation on the south side of the Fresh Water,” restricting burials to daylight hours.<sup>417</sup> A 1731 amendment to the 1722 law conveyed an even more intense fear of conspiracy:

...For the preventing of great numbers of slaves assembling and meeting together at their Funerals, under pretext whereof they have great opportunities of plotting an confederating together to do mischief, as well as neglecting their Masters Services it was ordered that, if more than twelve slaves assembled at a slave funeral, those present were to be whipped at the discretion of the Mayor, Recorder or one of the Alderman except the 12 slaves admitted by the owner of the dead slave, the gravedigger and the corpse bearers.<sup>418</sup>

In addition, the law forbade the use of “pawls” (palls) and pawl-bearers at the funerals of enslaved people, possibly because the cloth might be used to hide objects employed for insurrectionary purposes.<sup>419</sup>

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<sup>416</sup> Medford et al., “The Transatlantic Slave Trade to New York.”

<sup>417</sup> *MCC*, 1722, 3:296. Presumably, this law applied only to those persons living within the town limits.

<sup>418</sup> *MCC*, 1722, 4:86-88.

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*

It is no surprise that white New Yorkers sought to control the African population, even in death. In their mortuary practices, New York Africans exhibited unity and humanity; both challenged the legitimacy of slavery and threatened to undermine its very existence. The African Burial Ground was a powerful symbol of the strength of the African community and the commitment that its members had to each other. In a sense, it was an example of passive resistance, practiced by a people who were left with few alternative ways of challenging the legal status that had been imposed upon them.

## ***12.0 A Constant Source of Irritation: Resistance in the Eighteenth Century***

### ***12.1 Introduction***

White New Yorkers' fear of resistance among enslaved people was hardly unfounded. Court records and correspondence between slaveholders and agents attest to the propensity of New York Africans to resist subtly and sometimes violently their bondage and efforts to dehumanize them. While their actions posed no serious threat to survival of slavery as an institution, daily resistance in the form of sullen behavior, insubordination, theft and other criminal activity, running away, and a general disregard for laws designed to circumscribe their lives operated to undermine the effectiveness of white control.

Enslaved people in colonial New York recognized that demographic considerations and institutional safeguards precluded any possibility that they might upend the power relationship in the city. But they understood as well that the nature of the city itself—especially the labor needs of its economy—compromised slavery and enabled the enslaved population to enjoy certain freedoms inconsistent with a servile status. As a consequence, they took every opportunity to test the limits imposed on them.

While moving about the city ostensibly in the service of their owners, enslaved people took advantage of the opportunity to further their own interests. One might stop long enough to socialize with acquaintances or engage in illegal activities that had monetary as well as psychological value, such as “playing at dice or papa.”<sup>420</sup> Such interactions were frequent enough to persuade colonial New Yorkers that laws should be enacted that would limit the interchange and circumscribe the behavior of enslaved

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<sup>420</sup> Horsmanden, *The New York Conspiracy*, 463.

people. Building on the restrictions imposed shortly after the British gained control of the town and colony in the second half of the seventeenth century, a series of laws were passed that attempted to restrict movement and association. As in the earlier period, enslaved people defied the laws with impunity. Disobedience doubtless allowed them to affirm their humanity, acted as a safety valve for pent-up frustrations, and provided a practical solution to meeting the material needs and wants that were either unattainable or hindered by slavery.

## 12.2 *Flight*

When they found no satisfaction in simply disobedience of the law, enslaved people took flight. Primarily associated with young men, running away became especially pervasive as the growth of the city in the eighteenth century permitted a certain anonymity. As Shane White has shown in his study of late eighteenth-century African Americans in New York, those who fled from their owners were motivated by the desire to be free and to visit relatives and friends kept from them by the vagaries of slavery.<sup>421</sup>

Appeals in local newspapers for the apprehension of runaways reveal that literate blacks took ample advantage of the opportunities that knowing how to read and write afforded them. Enslaved people learned quickly that literacy and a facility with language enhanced their chances of successful escape. When Cesar absconded from John Moor,

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<sup>421</sup> See White, *Somewhat More Independent*.

the owner placed an advertisement which indicated that the enslaved man “Reads and Writes English, and its believed he has got a sham Pass.”<sup>422</sup> Cesar was apprehended, but “slipt away again at Kings-bridge” the following month.<sup>423</sup> Thirty-five year old Yass could also read and write and was considered a “sensible cunning Fellow, and has probably got a Pass forged.”<sup>424</sup> Other African-descended people were bilingual or multi-lingual, speaking their natal tongue as well as a variety of other languages.

### 12.3 *Insubordination*

Even when the boldness of flight held no appeal, those who remained in servitude exercised individual acts of defiance by the display of behaviors deemed by whites inappropriate or unacceptable for unfree people. Such conduct prompted Gerardus Beekman to part with an otherwise valuable laborer:

I find she Smoaks tobaico also which is also a bad Quality in a wench.  
she makes No Sauple and will tell Everyone who Asks her what You  
Sent her away for. Its because I drink and keep bad Company she says.<sup>425</sup>

Insubordination also proved to be the undoing of an enslaved woman held by Cadwallader Colden. Although her skills in the kitchen and at laundry and her “aversion to all strong Liquors” recommended her, Colden found her disposition to be intolerable:

Were it not for her Alusive Tongue her sullenness & the Custome of  
the Country that will not allow us to use our Negroes as you doe in  
Barbadoes when they Displeas you I would not have parted with her.  
But I doubt not that she'l make as good a slave as any in the island  
after a little of your Discipline or without it when she sees that she

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<sup>422</sup> New York *Gazette*, August 12 – 19, 1728.

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.*, September 23 – 30, 1728.

<sup>424</sup> *Ibid.*, June 23 – 30, 1729.

<sup>425</sup> Beekman Mercantile Papers, 3 vols., 1746-1799, trans. and edited by Phillip White (New York: New York Historical Society, 1956), 1:113.

cannot avoid it. I could have sold her here to good advantage but I have several other of her Children which I value & know if she should stay in this country she would spoil them. She was born in Barbadoes & is about 33 years old.<sup>426</sup>

#### 12.4 *Crime and Punishment*

As long as enslaved people gave dissatisfaction only to those to whom they were bound, punishment was at the discretion of the owner. But when they violated municipal or colony laws, owners lost control of and benefit from their own property. Such was the case with Cumbe, who on May 5, 1797, stood before the court accused of grand larceny. Despite his pleas of innocence, the enslaved man was convicted, not of the crime with which he was charged, but with petty larceny. Yet, the “Twenty coffee bags each of the value of five shillings” and “twelve pounds of dipt Candles” (also worth five shillings each) that he stole, carried a punishment of six months at hard labor in the Bridewell (the city jail). The court further judged his crime to be of sufficient gravity that his owner be encouraged to transport him.<sup>427</sup>

Cumbe’s crime was a common one among enslaved and free blacks in late eighteenth-century New York. Inadequate supervision of bondsmen and women, lax enforcement of laws intended to control black mobility, and a decided willingness on the part of certain elements of the white community to bridge the color divide if there was profit in it (and there frequently was) emboldened blacks to challenge prevailing legal constraints. They felt little moral compunction in dismissing laws that were neither

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<sup>426</sup> The Letters and Papers of Cadwallader Colden, I(1711-1729), March 26, 1717, in *Collections*, New York Historical Society, 1918.

<sup>427</sup> District Attorney’s Indictment Papers for the City of New York, 1790-1800. See also Minutes of the Court of General Sessions of the Peace, 1762-1776, Manuscript Collection, New York Municipal Archives.

instituted by them nor intended to protect their rights.

The laws that had been introduced in the second half of the seventeenth century that attempted to circumscribe black life were expanded throughout the eighteenth. In November 1702, the provincial legislature passed an “Act for Regulating Slaves” which constituted a comprehensive slave code. The measure forbade enslaved people from giving evidence in court against free men. If convicted of striking a free “Christian,” a bondsman could receive a sentence of 14 days in jail and be subjected to corporal punishment. In order to prevent enslaved men and women from “confederating together in running away, or other ill practices...,” the law denied them the right to meet in groups of more than three, except “when it shall happen they meet in some servile Employ’m’t for their Master’s or Mistress’s proffitt, and by their Master or Mistress consent.” Conviction for such an offense carried a penalty of up to 40 lashes “upon the naked back.”<sup>428</sup>

The provincial act of 1702 also strengthened the 1684 law intended to restrict the economic activity of enslaved people. While the earlier measure forbade a servant or bondsman to “give sell or truck any comodity whatsoever,”<sup>429</sup> the new act prohibited any person “to Trade with any slave either in buying or selling, without leave and Consent of the Master or Mistress, on penalty of forfeiting Treble the value of the thing traded for and the sum of five pounds.”<sup>430</sup>

The laws that followed the 1702 act reiterated white New York’s concern with controlling black behavior, especially those actions that reflected violent resistance.

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<sup>428</sup> *Colonial Laws*, 1:519-21 (November 1702).

<sup>429</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:157.

<sup>430</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:519-21.

Murder and conspiracy to commit the murder of freemen and women were declared capital offenses, as were rape or conspiracy to rape. Anyone who would “willfully burn any dwelling-house, barn, stable, out-house, stakes of Corn or Hay, or shall willfully mutilate, mayhem or dismember...or shall willfully murder...he, she or they so offending shall suffer the pains of Death...”<sup>431</sup> Enslaved people were forbidden to use or have in their possession firearms, unless with the permission or in the presence of their owners.<sup>432</sup>

The relative ease with which New York’s black population moved about the city, anxieties regarding theft, and the manner in which black people chose to pass their leisure time led to legislation controlling entertainment. In 1722, New Yorkers passed a measure which restrained enslaved laborers from gaming with money. Gaming for copper pennies, half pence, or farthings was prohibited in any street, house, outbuilding, or yard. And in early 1741, the Council passed a law that prevented blacks from fetching water on Sundays beyond the nearest pump or well and forbade them from riding a horse through the streets or on the Common.<sup>433</sup>

When either enslaved blacks or free black men and women ran afoul of the law, they could expect swift punishment. The nature and degree of that punishment, however, varied widely. In August 1719, Betty and Frank, two laborers accused of unspecified

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<sup>431</sup> Ibid., I:765 (December 1712).

<sup>432</sup> Ibid., I:761-67 (December 1712).

<sup>433</sup> *MCC*, 3:277-278, 1722, and 5:50, 1741.



offenses, suffered the court's finding that they be "tied to a cart and whipped upon the Naked back" 39 lashes as they made their way about the city.<sup>434</sup> William Luce's "Negro man", James, was ordered to receive "25 stripes on his naked back at the public whipping post" for the same offense that had landed Cumbe six months in jail. Harry was confined to jail for eight days for the crime of petty larceny. Free man Jack, indicted for stealing twelve ears of Indian corn, pled guilt and received 15 lashes on his bare back.<sup>435</sup> Interestingly, the standard punishment for petty larceny appeared to be somewhat harsher than this, as John McCune, who pled guilty to petty larceny in 1769 was sentenced to receive 39 lashes. Other offenders routinely received a similar number.<sup>436</sup> In the case of enslaved offenders, however, the court generally recommended that they be transported elsewhere.

Blakey and Rankin-Hill suggest that more violent forms of punishment were meted out to New York Africans. In their study of the burial ground population they found evidence of numerous fractures to both men and women that are suggestive of violent treatment. The most dramatic example is Burial 25, the young woman alluded to in Chapter 1 of this report. In addition to a gunshot wound, the woman's remains reveal "blunt force trauma to the face" and an "oblique fracture of the lower right arm just about the wrist caused by simultaneous twisting and pulling."<sup>437</sup> In Burial 364 the remains appear to be mutilated, and in Burials 330, 331, 362, and 372 only the heads were found,

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<sup>434</sup> Minutes of the Court of General Sessions of the Peace (August 4, 1719); see also Stokes, *Iconography*, 399.

<sup>435</sup> Minutes of the Court of General Sessions of the Peace, 1762-1776, in *New York City Court Records, 1760-1791*, Kenneth Scott, compiler (Washington, DC: National Genealogical Society, 1983) 412-413.

<sup>436</sup> *Ibid.*, 1760-1797, 22.

<sup>437</sup> "The New York African Burial Ground Skeletal Biology Final Report," November 2004.

suggesting, perhaps, deliberate decapitation. Such practices would have been consistent with punishments for capital offenses in Colonial New York, especially those involving armed revolt.

## *12.5 Armed Revolt*

### *12.5.1 The 1712 Uprising*

Overt and violent resistance to slavery was rare, demographic factors perhaps having influenced decisions to respond to enslavement more clandestinely. Occasionally, however, black men and women did take up arms in resistance to their bondage. Such was the case in 1712, when a group of enslaved laborers “resolved to revenge themselves for some hard usage they apprehended to have received from their masters.”<sup>438</sup> The men set fire to an outbuilding and waited in ambush as their owners came to extinguish the flames.<sup>439</sup> Armed with guns, knives, hatchets, and swords, they killed nine “Christians” (that is, whites) and wounded several others. The governor dispatched a militia unit to hunt them down the following day. As the military forces closed in, six insurrectionists took their own lives rather than endure New York’s swift and deadly justice.<sup>440</sup>

The court eventually charged more than three dozen men and women with murder, accessory to murder, or assault. Twenty-seven were convicted and sentenced to suffer punishments reserved for those who dared to strike a blow for freedom: hanging in chains, burning at the stake (including one by slow roasting), and breaking on the wheel. At least two women were convicted, one of whom was pregnant and received a reprieve

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<sup>438</sup> “Governor Hunter to the Lords of Trade,” *DRCHNY*, 5:341.

<sup>439</sup> Kenneth Scott, “The Slave Insurrection in New York in 1712,” *New York Historical Society Quarterly*, (1971), 1:43-74.

<sup>440</sup> “*DRCHNY* 5: 341.

until delivered of her child.<sup>441</sup>

The insurrectionists were drawn from various African groups resident in the city. They included West Africans from the Gold Coast (so-called Cormantines), those from the Slave Coast (the Pawpaws or Popo), and free blacks. Some of the African-born could not speak English and, hence, required the use of an interpreter at their trials.<sup>442</sup> The union of the various African peoples suggests that, although they may have been separated by linguistic and cultural differences, enslaved New York Africans found common cause in resistance to bondage.<sup>443</sup> Not only had they come to an agreement over the necessity for armed resistance, but they had settled on African traditions and beliefs to seal the collaborative effort. Before taking up arms against their owners, the men enlisted the aid of Peter, the Doctor, “a free negro who pretended sorcery [and] gave them powder to rub on their clothes to make them invulnerable.”<sup>444</sup> Such behavior is suggestive of other acts of resistance in the American colonies and in the Caribbean such as the Stono Revolt and the Maroon uprising in Jamaica of the early 1700s and later in the century.<sup>445</sup> In many instances cemeteries played a prominent role in such activities.<sup>446</sup> It is likely that the African Burial Ground itself was a rallying point for such action in 1712.

Two of the participants in the revolt in 1712 were “Spanish Indians” who had

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<sup>441</sup> *DRCHNY*, 5:341. See also Scott, “The 1712 Revolt,” 62.

<sup>442</sup> Foote, “Black Life in Colonial Manhattan,” 216.

<sup>443</sup> See Foote for discussion of likely motivations of each group of insurrectionists, 215-16.

<sup>444</sup> Quoted in Kenneth Scott, “The Slave Insurrection in New York in 1712,” 47.

<sup>445</sup> Long, *The History of Jamaica*.

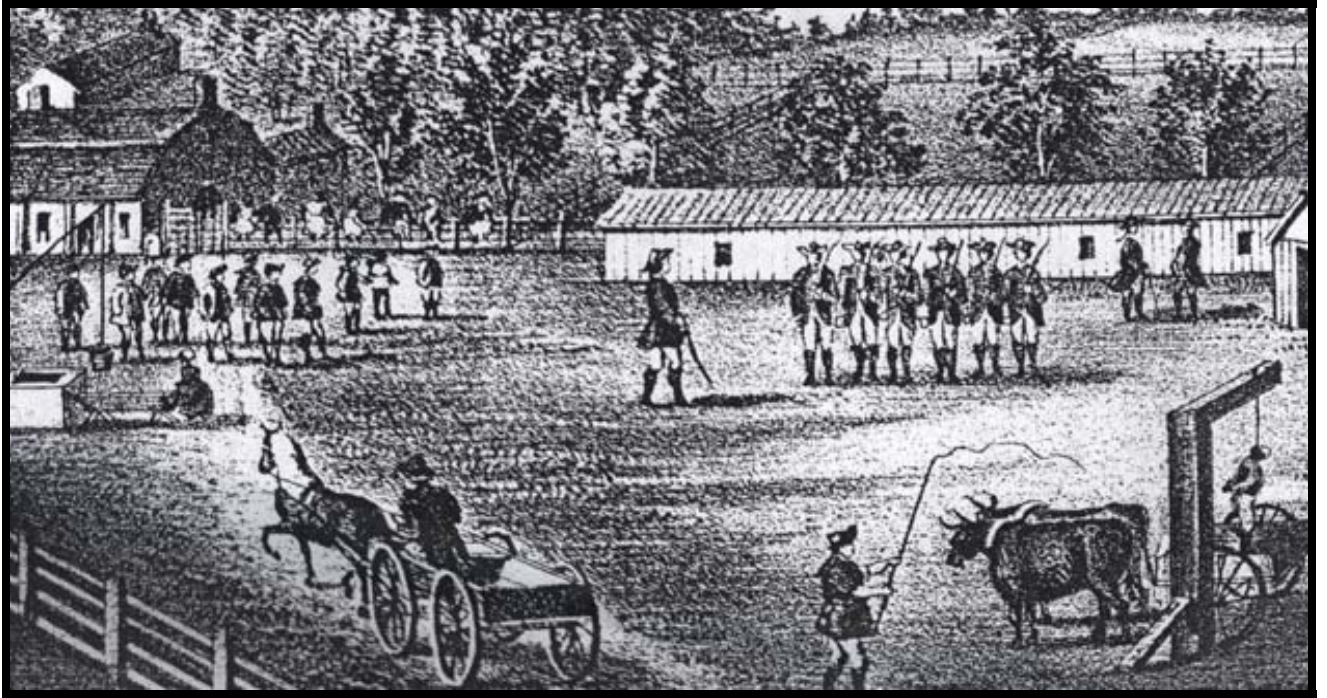
arrived in New York as prizes from a captured Spanish vessel. They had been resident in the city for several years, and “by reason of their color which is swarthy, they were said to be slaves and as such were sold, among many others of the same colour and country.”<sup>447</sup> The Spanish Indians had claimed free status, some of them indicating that they had been members of the ships’ crews.<sup>448</sup> The issue of the status of such enslaved people continued to prove problematic for New Yorkers for many years following the 1712 Revolt. Their presence and influence would be quite evident later in the century during the 1741 “conspiracy.”

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<sup>446</sup> Michael Mullin, *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean, 1736-1831* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

<sup>447</sup> *DRCHNY*, 5:342.

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.* See also Foote, “Black Life in Colonial Manhattan,” 214.



**Figure 12.1: Execution of a New York African on the Common** (from Valentine's *Manual of the Corporation of the City of New York*, 1860).

### 12.5.2 *The Great “Conspiracy” of 1741*

The uniting of diverse segments of the community of African peoples in New York was reflected in the 1741 “conspiracy” as well. The meaning of the events of that year remains open to debate,<sup>449</sup> but testimony given in the trials that followed illuminates the interactions and shared sympathies of many in the New York African community. The incident also provides insight into the relationships between enslaved Africans and those in the city whose personal interests conflicted with the laws and prevailing social customs.

Word of a conspiracy among the enslaved population began with accusations leveled by Mary Burton, a teenage servant girl indentured to tavern keeper John Hughson. Following the arrest of two enslaved men for burglarizing a local shop, Burton first implicated her employer as a fencer of stolen goods and a frequent entertainer of enslaved people. A short time later, the young woman again offered evidence against Hughson, claiming that he was the leader of a group of black men which was responsible for a series of fires currently threatening the city. The aim of the enslaved men, she claimed, was to burn down the city, to kill many of its white residents, and to make Hughson king.<sup>450</sup> In addition to the enslaved men and the tavern owner, she accused Hughson’s wife, Sarah, another white woman who boarded with the couple and socialized with blacks, and later, a schoolmaster whom she alleged was a Catholic

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<sup>449</sup> Thomas J. Davis argues that New York Africans in the 1740s spoke and acted in ways that suggested that they chafed under their bondage and conspired, if not to burn down the city, at least to take actions that would redress their grievances. See Davis, *A Rumor of Revolt*.

<sup>450</sup> Horsmanden, *The New York Conspiracy*, 41-42.

priest.<sup>451</sup> New Yorkers, fearing an uprising of enslaved Africans, encouraged by the “hand of popery,”<sup>452</sup> could not bring themselves to accept the possibility that black men might rise up of their own accord. Hence, Hughson became the “contriver and main spring of the whole design.”<sup>453</sup> Sensing the need of white New Yorkers to credit white intervention for the alleged conspiracy, Africans who sought to save themselves from the flames of the stake and the hangman’s noose told the authorities what they longed to hear. Black men (and a few women) had met at Hughson’s where the white man swore them into a confederation bent on destruction of the colonial city.

Testimony given at the ensuing trial revealed that Hughson’s Tavern was frequented by varied groups of people of African descent. Present were “country negroes” who routinely traveled to the city with produce which they sold from their owners’ farms in the Out Ward and other jurisdictions. Joining them were “Spanish Negroes” who found themselves unlawfully enslaved and who took every opportunity to proclaim their rightful status.<sup>454</sup> Also present were other acculturated blacks who lived and labored within the town limits and, alongside them, fairly recently arrived Africans. At least one of the men in the group, Will (the enslaved laborer of Anthony Ward, a watch maker), had been implicated in two uprisings in the West Indies, one in St. John’s and the other at Antigua in 1736.<sup>455</sup> Will purportedly had taunted the men assembled at

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<sup>451</sup> Ibid., 44, 213-14. The woman boarder was apparently the lover of one of the leaders of the alleged insurrection. John Ury, the suspected Catholic priest, represented the fear of white New Yorkers of being taken over by the Spanish. See McManus, 131-136.

<sup>452</sup> Lieutenant-Governor Clarke to the Lords of Trade, New York, June 20, 1741, *DRCHNY*, 6:197-98.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>454</sup> Horsmanden., *The New York Conspiracy*, 185-86.

<sup>455</sup> Ibid., 265-66.

Hughson's with the statement that blacks in New York were "cowards; for that they had no hearts as those at Antigua."<sup>456</sup>

The testimony also suggested that enslaved blacks had extraordinary freedom of movement in the city. Cuff "had a great deal of time upon his hands, perhaps more than any negro in town, consequently was much at large for making frequent daily or nightly visits at Hughson's." Similarly, Jack was often at liberty because his owner, Gerardus Comfort, was away for extended periods. Comfort's yard was a meeting place for Africans who came there to get tea water.<sup>457</sup> Clearly, enslaved men had ample opportunity to gather simply to socialize or plot revolt.

Evidence suggests that ethnic solidarity may have played an important role in networking among the enslaved population, as people bearing Akan day names were friends and alleged conspirators.<sup>458</sup> Supposedly in recruiting for the revolt, the men often greeted each other with the appellation "countryman."<sup>459</sup> However, the principal organizing units, whatever the nature of the conspiracy, were the social organizations most popular among black men: the "Geneva Club," the "Fly Boys," and the "Long Bridge Boys."

Despite the assertion that the defendants were "furnished with all the necessities

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<sup>456</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>457</sup> Ibid., 115, 145-46. The well on Comfort's property was used extensively by the town's residents, who sent their servants to fetch good drinking water. The property was near Hughson's establishment.

<sup>458</sup> Ibid., especially 466-473.

<sup>459</sup> Ibid., 245. Michael Gomez has argued that the degree of cooperation among various African ethnicities, as well as between the native born and creole, depended on the ability to forge a common identity, one which required a de-emphasis on ethnic group and class and the embracing of a racial consciousness. For a discussion of this effort toward transformation, see *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998).



of life, meat, drink, and clothing,<sup>460</sup> enslaved people had good cause to strike out against their owners and the institution that kept them fettered. But there was little to be gained by resisting so overtly. New York Africans were well aware that demographics did not favor them or any attempt they might make to seize their freedom. The setting of fires to cloak theft, however, might be viewed by some as a plausible activity in which to engage. White New Yorkers, already alarmed by reports of recent revolts elsewhere, could come to no more reasonable explanation for the events of 1741 than that enslaved people were bent on destroying the city and killing them. The hysteria that ensued led to the execution of 30 Africans—13 at the stake and 17 by hanging. Seventy-one others—as a consequence of perceived lesser culpability—suffered transport outside of the colony.

## 12.6 *Women and Resistance*

Among those transported was Sarah, the sole woman convicted in the affair.

Remarking on the rarity that her conviction presented to the court, Horsmanden wrote:

This was one of the oddest animals amongst the black confederates, and gave the most trouble in her examinations; a creature of an outrageous spirit...She, no doubt, must have had extraordinary qualifications to recommend her to the confidence of the confederates; for she was the only wench against whom there was strong and flagrant evidence of having consented to and approved this execrable project.<sup>461</sup>

Had Horsmanden taken the time to investigate, he would have realized that the spirit of resistance Sarah exhibited was shared by many of her enslaved sisters. In

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<sup>460</sup> Horsmanden, 106-107.

<sup>461</sup> Horsmanden, 121-22.

discussing enslaved women's resistance in the West Indies, historian Barbara Bush contended that this "spirit of revolt," rather than constituting a spontaneous occurrence, reflected a "continuum of resistance which linked Africa and the West Indies."<sup>462</sup> Equiano told of watching his mother and other women among the Igbo in West Africa who defended their villages against invasion.<sup>463</sup> Women destined for New York doubtless brought that tradition with them. Despite their apparent absence from open revolt, black women in New York attempted to subvert the laws and customs and to enjoy a certain degree of self-determination in a variety of ways. Burdened with the added responsibility of child-rearing and somewhat isolated within the owner's household, women did not have the opportunity to flee as often as men. Nor did they have as much chance for the creation of sisterhoods that might lead to emotional support and profit. Yet, an undeniable hunger for freedom and a desire to disrupt normal economic operations sometimes elicited flight. The effort to attain a level of subsistence might lead to the pilfering of household and personal items that could be used for one's own comfort, exchanged for cash, or bartered. Frustration over lack of autonomy sometimes led to arson, a dangerous and destructive business in light of eighteenth-century building characteristics.

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<sup>462</sup> Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990), 67.

<sup>463</sup> Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative* (ed. Robert J. Allison), 40.

Although not all black women were constant irritants to their owners, their contentious sisters were numerous enough to challenge the notion that domestic laborers acquiesced to an allegedly mild form of slavery in New York.<sup>464</sup>

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<sup>464</sup> For a discussion of black women's resistance in colonial New York see Edna Greene Medford and Emilyn Brown, "A Constant Source of Irritation: Enslaved Women's Resistance in the City of New York." Howard University Archives Online Journal, August, 2000, <http://www.huarchivesnet.howard.edu/0008huarnet/medford1.htm>.

### ***13.0 New York Africans in the Age of Revolution***

#### ***13.1 Introduction***

Resistance reflected a desire to expand personal liberty, if not an inclination to overthrow the institution of slavery itself. Hence, when white New Yorkers raised their voices and shouldered their guns in defense of their rights as free men in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the population of people of African descent stood ready to use the situation to their advantage. Their own struggles heretofore—whether subtle day-to-day efforts designed to provide momentary psychological relief or more direct action that shook slavery’s foundations—prepared them to enter the War for Independence out of self-interest. Through participation in the struggle—whether on the side of the colonial forces or as agents of the British—large numbers of New York Africans seized freedom for themselves, helped to alter perceptions about liberty, and set in motion events that led ultimately to emancipation of the city’s and the state’s bondsmen and women.

#### ***13.2 Securing and Extending Freedom in Revolutionary New York***

On September 15, 1776, British forces under Commander-in-Chief General Henry Clinton occupied New York City. The military units would remain in place until November 25, 1783, when defeat at the hands of the patriots would compel the British to evacuate. During the ensuing seven-year occupation, the city would experience all the challenges attending wartime disruptions—martial law, food and fuel shortages, exorbitant prices for consumer goods and basic necessities, and shortage of housing resulting from British efforts to quarter soldiers after the destruction of roughly one-

fourth of the city by fire. New York also experienced fluctuations in its population, as British troops, loyalists, and enslaved runaways occupied the space vacated by patriots fleeing British advance.<sup>465</sup> As has already been noted, the African Burial Ground may have served as the final resting place for some of these people as well as for captured American soldiers who were imprisoned in New York during the war.<sup>466</sup>

Wartime New York witnessed the expansion of population and possibilities for its African American residents as well, both those who had lived there before the Revolution and those who made their way to the British side once armed conflict commenced. As the headquarters of British forces, the city attracted runaways from bondage, especially after Lord Dunmore, governor of Virginia, and later Commander-in-Chief of British forces, General Henry Clinton, issued proclamations offering freedom to those willing to flee their patriot owners and join His Majesty's legion.<sup>467</sup> As a consequence, thousands of enslaved laborers left plantation and farm, evacuating with the British forces when they left tidewater Virginia and lowcountry Georgia and South Carolina. Some of those persons thus removed landed in New York where their presence reshaped the character of black life in the city and encouraged those still held in bondage by Loyalist slaveholders to intensify their own struggle for freedom.

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<sup>465</sup> Bayrd Still, *Mirror for Gotham: New York as Seen by Contemporaries from Dutch Days to the Present* (New York: New York University Press, 1956), 43-44.

<sup>466</sup> See Thelma Foote et al., "Report of the Site-Specific History of Block 154."

<sup>467</sup> Dunmore issued his proclamation in 1775 to enslaved people in Virginia where he was governor. The proclamation declared "all indentured servants, negroes, or others (appertaining to rebels) free, that are able and willing to bear arms, they joining his Majesty's troops..." General Henry Clinton's Philipsburg Proclamation of 1779 offered "to every NEGRO who shall desert the Rebel Standard, full security to follow within these Lines, any Occupation which he shall think proper." These proclamations enticed enslaved people to flee to the British and brought many to the city of New York. See Graham Hodges, "Black Revolt in New York City and the Neutral Zone: 1775-83," in *New York in the Age of the Constitution, 1775-1800*, eds. Paul Gilje and William Pencak (New York Historical Society), 23, 27, 30 and 33.

Black fugitives from the South and New York's own enslaved and free blacks served in both a military and civilian labor capacity during the Revolutionary era. Military laborers consisted of armed troops as well as those who performed manual labor. Groups such as the Black Brigade, formed shortly after British occupation of the city, personified the willingness of black men to fight on the side of the British, as long as the latter ensured eventual freedom. Under the leadership of its black commander, Colonel Tye, the Black Brigade waged guerrilla warfare in the patriot-controlled countryside and towns, ferrying enslaved laborers to the British lines as well as livestock and other essential goods.<sup>468</sup> Other men joined the patriots, less because they cared about American independence than that they embraced the promise of eventual freedom. That promise was made belatedly, following earlier American objections to black fighting men.

Those men less inclined toward direct military participation sought to advance their own interests by taking advantage of opportunities for employment made possible by the scarcity of white laborers. The British made extensive use of black civilian laborers who served as teamsters and porters, operated watercraft, and strengthened the city's defenses. Free blacks and those who were refugees received wages, and the latter, the promise of freedom.<sup>469</sup> Locally enslaved men did not fare as well. They were hired out by their owners to the British army and continued to perform those labors considered too dangerous or disagreeable for whites. Hence, the person responsible for keeping the chimneys of the army quarters clean employed "a half dozen negroes, each of whom can

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<sup>468</sup> Ibid., 24. See also Hodges, *Root and Branch*: African Americans in New York and East Jersey, 1613-1863 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 151-52.

<sup>469</sup> Foote, "Black Life in Colonial Manhattan," 368.

sweep at least twenty chimneys a day, and often must clean more,” reported one observer.<sup>470</sup> Yet, the chimney sweeps received nothing for their labor, “save coarse food and rags.”<sup>471</sup>

The uncertainty that plagued enslaved people who sought freedom in wartime New York is evident in the recollections of fugitive Boston King, who fled to the British forces in South Carolina, was captured by the patriots and brought to New Jersey, and eventually escaped to freedom in New York. His sense of security was interrupted at the end of the war, when rumors surfaced that fugitives would be returned to their owners. “The dreadful rumour filled us all with inexpressible anguish and terror,” King recalled, “especially when we saw our old masters coming from Virginia, North Carolina, and other parts, and seizing upon their slaves in the streets of New York, or even dragging them out of their beds.”<sup>472</sup>

When the British forces and the Loyalists withdrew from the city in 1783, 4,000 black men, women, and children (most of them recent arrivals from the former southern colonies) evacuated with them. Among the black evacuees, however, were long term residents of New York who had been owned by the city’s most successful merchants. Fifty year old Cyrus, for example, had been enslaved by the Bayard family. Carlotta Livingston (also fifty) had been enslaved by the Livingstons. A great many individuals

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<sup>470</sup> Quoted in Still, *Mirror for Gotham*, 53.

<sup>471</sup> Ibid.

<sup>472</sup> Quoted in James W. St. G. Walker, “Blacks as American Loyalists: The Slaves’ War for Independence,” in *Slavery, Revolutionary America, and the New Nation*, ed. Paul Finkelman (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1989), 4:459. See also *Memoirs of Boston King, a Black Preacher, Written by Himself* (1796). Canada’s Digital Collections, <http://collections.ic.gc.ca/blackloyalists/documents/diaries/king~memoirs.htm>.

came from Phillipse Manor.<sup>473</sup> Most had secured their freedom by their participation in the war; others had purchased it or had been born free.

The origins and backgrounds of the black evacuees were as varied as those at the beginning of the century. Thomas Brown, for example, was from the West Indies and had lived in the city for only a few years. Twenty-four year old Elizabeth Black had been brought to the city from Madagascar at nine years old by the Van Cortlandt family. Twenty-two year old Joe Freeman, born in St. Kitts, arrived in New York in a privateer, while twenty-five year old Cato had been brought to the city eighteen years before on a ship from Guinea.<sup>474</sup>

The evacuees hoped to enjoy freedom and prosperity in Nova Scotia, where they were promised land and an opportunity to live independent lives. But the failure of the British to honor their promises and refusal by locals to extend either rights or assistance prompted frustrated black Loyalists to seek and gain permission to emigrate to Sierra Leone. Before century's end, they had traded the disappointment of a Canadian existence for the prospect for better times in Africa.<sup>475</sup>

As had been promised by the Americans, those enslaved New Yorkers who had supported independence received their reward of freedom. A law passed by the New York Assembly on March 20, 1781 had declared that any enslaved man "who shall serve [in the military] for a term of three years, or until regularly discharged, shall immediately after such service or discharge be, and is hereby declared to be a free man of this

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<sup>473</sup> The Book of Negroes Registered and Certified after Having Been Inspected by the Commissioners Appointed by His Excellency Sr. Guy Carleton R.B. General and Commander in Chief on Board Sundry Vessels...10427. Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York Public Library.

<sup>474</sup> Ibid.

<sup>475</sup> Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*. See also Ellen Gibson Wilson, *The Loyal Blacks*.



state.”<sup>476</sup> The 1781 law assisted in providing the environment that ultimately would lead to an effort for universal emancipation of all New York Africans.

### 13.3 *Manumission in City and State*

In the wake of the Revolution and its attending egalitarian rhetoric (and doubtless influenced by slavery’s lesser significance to the economy), newly formed states in the North moved to implement plans of emancipation for all blacks, either by gradual process or through immediate legislative and judicial action. In New York, this effort was spearheaded by the Manumission Society, established in January 1785, and whose ranks included merchants, ship owners, bankers, lawyers, judges, and even slaveholders. Eventually, the organization would include in its membership men as prominent as John Jay, Alexander Hamilton, and Thomas Duane, mayor of the city. The men contended that “as free citizens and Christians” they were obliged to

regard with compassion the injustice done to those among us who are held as slaves [and] to endeavor by lawful ways and means to enable them to share equally with us, in that civil and religious liberty with which an indulgent Providence has blessed these states and to which these, our Brethren are by nature, as much entitled as ourselves.<sup>477</sup>

The members of the Society were especially concerned with improving the condition of the miniscule number of free blacks while taking a slow and cautious approach to dismantling slavery. “The violent attempts lately made to seize and export for sale, several free negroes who were peaceably following their respective occupations in this city, must excite the indignation of every friend of humanity and ought to receive

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<sup>476</sup> Quoted in Higginbotham, Jr., *In the Matter of Color*, 138.

<sup>477</sup> Reports of the Standing Committees of the New York Manumission Society, 1785-1822 (February 4, 1787), New York Historical Society (microfilm).

exemplary punishment,” the Society proclaimed.<sup>478</sup> The reference was to “Blackbirders,” abductors whose activities kept the Society occupied for the next several years. The organization sought to ameliorate the condition of those enslaved by speaking out against public sales “whereby [blacks] are made a bait to avarice, and more liable to be separated from endearing connections.”<sup>479</sup> After the state passed the Act for Gradual Manumission in 1799, the Society facilitated the liberation of those whose enslavement conflicted with the laws. Hence, in 1800, the organization reported that it had aided those seeking freedom as a consequence of the laws prohibiting importation and exportation of enslaved people, as descendants of Indians, and as veterans on the side of the Americans in the Revolution.<sup>480</sup> Rather than dismantling the institution of slavery, such actions served to attack it peripherally.<sup>481</sup>

#### *13.4 Education and Social Control*

At mid-century a “Charitable society of worthy and well disposed Christians in England” consented to be the primary support for the establishment and maintenance of a school for the instruction of black children in reading, sewing and other skills. The advertisement seeking a school director appealed to New Yorkers who “have a regard for the souls of their poor young slaves...to assist in forwarding and promoting” the endeavor.<sup>482</sup> As access to freedom increased and concerns arose over improving the

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<sup>478</sup> Ibid.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid., February 21, 1788.

<sup>480</sup> Ibid., May 19, 1800.

<sup>481</sup> See Shane White’s commentary on the subject in *Somewhat More Independent*, 81-87.

<sup>482</sup> New York *Mercury*, August 4, 1760.

conditions of free and freed blacks, efforts toward providing education for black children intensified. In 1785, black and white working adults were organized to teach child apprentices various trades. The *American Minerva*, a local newspaper, reported:

... nothing can tend to raise the African character more than by such means rescuing them from the state of servitude to which they are now universally condemned...the African shall find himself associated with free industrious mechanics: his thoughts will be raised, his mind will expand, and he will stand a proof to mankind, that nature has not done less for the negro, than for any of her other children.<sup>483</sup>

In addition to this instruction in manual labor, African Free Schools were established, beginning in 1787. There, black children learned the fundamentals of reading and writing and began to hone skills that would prepare them for the leadership of their people.

The Manumission Society played a significant role in this effort, providing monetary support for several of the schools for black children. But such support carried with it a demand to free blacks that they conform to the values and standards imposed by white New Yorkers. In 1788, the Society appointed a committee to “consider the ways and means to prevent the irregular behavior of free Negroes.” The committee found it advisable to require all blacks who were under the patronage of the Society to be required to be registered in a book that recorded their names, ages, residence, occupation, and number of persons in their household. If they changed residence or their family membership increased or declined, they were to report such to the trustees of the school or their representative. Trustees were authorized to refuse admission to any children whose parents failed to register. Finally, the committee advised, that those who registered be notified that

the benefits to be derived from this Society are not to be extended to any except such as maintain good character for sobriety and honesty – an

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<sup>483</sup> *American Minerva*, August 22, 1785.

peaceable and orderly living: - and that they be particularly cautioned against admitting servants or slaves to their houses – receiving or purchasing any thing from them; and against allowing fiddling, dancing...<sup>484</sup>

The Manumission Society may have been willing to facilitate the transition from slavery to freedom, but it was equally determined to shape the lives of those it had helped.

### 13.5 *Protest and Agency in the Late Eighteenth Century*

The experiences of war and efforts to improve the condition of free blacks in the postwar era fostered black agency in the final decades of the eighteenth century. Those blacks who gained literacy used it to advocate for themselves and the rest of the black community. Well versed in their legal rights, they became politically active and spoke out against the injustices they saw around them.

A petition free blacks brought in 1788 illustrates the concerns of that community and their ability to take action on their own behalf. The petition protested the desecration of the most sacred of places for the community—the burial ground:

That it hath lately been the constant Practice of a number of Young Gentlemen in this City who call themselves students of Physick to repair to the Burying Ground adjudged for the use of your Petitioners and under cover of the night and in the most wanton sallies of excess to dig up the bodies of the deceased Friends and relatives of your Petitioners, carry them away, and without respect to age or sex, mangle their flesh out of a Wanton curiosity and then expose it to the Beasts and Birds.<sup>485</sup>

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<sup>484</sup> Reports of the Standing Committees of the New York Manumission Society, February 21, 1788.

<sup>485</sup> Unfiled Papers of the Common Council, February 4, 1788. New York Municipal Archives.

Grave robbing had become a serious concern to New Yorkers in the winter and spring of 1788, especially to blacks who were the principal victims. Readers of the *Daily Advertiser* were told that “few blacks are buried whose bodies are permitted to remain in the grave...swine have been seen devouring the entrails and flesh of women, taken out of a grave, which on account of an alarm, was left behind...that human flesh has been taken up along the docks [and] sewed up in bags.”<sup>486</sup> In a sarcastic response to the concerns presented in the newspaper, a “Student of Physic” ridiculed those who would speak for the dead while ignoring the suffering of the living. As the practice of grave robbing continued, alarmed blacks secured a private lot on which to bury their dead, but medical students threatened the owner of the property, extracted the body of a child from the grave, and attempted to secure another. The bold act elicited a warning to the abductors:

...they may not alone suffer abduction of their wealth, but perhaps their lives may be the forfeit of their temerity should they dare to persist in their robberies, especially at unlawful hours of night.<sup>487</sup>

The disquiet created by newspaper reports and occasional raids on white cemeteries turned to rage in April. Children who happened upon a dissection in progress alerted their parents who in searching the hospital found partially dissected bodies. Over the course of three days an angry mob pursued the city’s doctors and destroyed property. The riot was quelled only after the militia fired on the mob, killing five and wounding several more.<sup>488</sup>

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<sup>486</sup> New York *Daily Advertiser*, February 16, 1788.

<sup>487</sup> The *Daily Advertiser*, February 15, 1788; see also Jules Calvin Landeheim, “Doctors’ Mob of 1788”, *Journal of Medical History*, 1950, 5: 27.

<sup>488</sup> Claude Heaton, “Body Snatching in New York City,” *New York Journal of Medicine* 43(1943):1862-1863.

It is uncertain how many of those who took part in the event were people of color, but there can be little doubt that African Americans had the most to gain in raising their voices against such injustices.

Beyond protecting themselves from the utter disregard of their human rights, blacks in late eighteenth-century New York sought to build institutions that would meet their needs for independence and that would reflect their own sense of community. In the final decade of the century they sought to provide for their own spiritual well-being by establishing the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. Such action was motivated by the desire to control their own religious institutions and to worship free of discriminatory practices.

In 1794, free blacks in New York formed the African Society “for the laudable purposes of improving...morals...promoting a Spirit of brotherly Love, and a strict regard to the Laws of the State.”<sup>489</sup> In addition to securing property for the erection of a church, the Society intended to “procure a place for...the interment of people of color.”<sup>490</sup> In 1795, the organization petitioned the Common Council for assistance in reaching those goals. Shortly thereafter, property was purchased on Chrystie Street and a new cemetery was opened.<sup>491</sup>

The opening of the Chrystie Street cemetery coincided with the closing of the African Burial Ground. Doubtless, the petitioners had sought to secure a new cemetery because the African Burial Ground had been reserved for other uses. Grading of the site

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<sup>489</sup> Petition of the African Society on the Subject of two Lots purchased for burial ground, June 22, 1795, *MCC*, II:112.

<sup>490</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>491</sup> *MCC*, 2:137.

and its subdivision into lots in 1795 ushered in a new and significant phase in the history of the plot of land that most colonial New Yorkers had not thought valuable enough to merit much attention. But its closing deprived New York Africans of a vital symbol of black community and humanity. In time, the cemetery and the people interred there became a deeply buried memory, inaccessible to posterity and denied their place in New York history.

## Epilogue

During the decade of the African Burial Ground's closure, nearly 6,000 persons of African descent resided in New York County, more than half of them as free people. Gradual emancipation swelled their numbers with each passing year and encouraged blacks to seek opportunities for independence in the transitioning economy. European visitors to New York during this period noted the entrepreneurial ventures of certain free blacks, indicating that they operated fruit and oyster stands or managed small shops.<sup>492</sup> Others attempted to enter the trades but met stiff resistance from white mechanics who viewed them as a threat to their own source of income.<sup>493</sup>

Black women and children often had little recourse but to accept whatever employment was offered to them, be it in industries such as cloth manufacturing, supplying labor on Long Island and New Jersey farms, laundering clothes, or manning stalls in the public markets.<sup>494</sup> At times, black women and their children were exposed to especially dangerous work. In 1790, for instance, a fire broke out at Slidell's soap and tallow manufactory. Caused by boiling turpentine, the fire "burned a negro girl and scorched her mother considerably."<sup>495</sup>

The impending demise of slavery encouraged both the free and bound to press for a new relationship, one that recognized the changing times and that reflected the determination of New York Africans to exercise greater control over their lives. Perhaps

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<sup>492</sup> Still, *Mirror for Gotham*, 89.

<sup>493</sup> Rock, *The New York City Artisan*, 110.

<sup>494</sup> Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 13-14, 16.

<sup>495</sup> New York *Daily Advertiser*, December 10, 1790.



many a wealthy New Yorker echoed the sentiments of merchant John Pintard, who complained “How much the comfort of existence depends on domestics.” Pintard recorded in his diary the challenges of trying to “manage” the loss of a young girl who had formerly tended his household:

Our little black girl Betty, was yesterday taken away by her parents altho' Mama had consented to pay the extravagant wages of \$3 a month for her services, being only 11 years....we are well rid of a child who was subject to the control of a capricious cross grained mother whom nothing could satisfy. She expressed an expectation that her child should be sent daily to school and have presents in the bargain, as many such places to be found, in which she will find herself mistaken. . . <sup>496</sup>

Yet, certain old relationships died hard and highlighted the complexity of black-white relations in late eighteenth-century New York. Such is the example provided by a free black man named Derry. Derry was the “sole support” of his former mistress, the widow of tavern keeper George Burns. In 1796 fortune visited Derry in the form of \$10,000 in lottery winnings. When told of his improved financial status, the man purportedly said: “[N]ow I will be able to maintain my old mistress genteely.”<sup>497</sup>

If Derry felt some need to show loyalty to an old mistress, other New York Africans thought that they could secure equality and fair play by proving their loyalty to the nation. Hence, when the second war with Britain threatened the country in 1812, African Americans hastened to its defense. Fearing impending attack from British forces, New York authorities had appealed to the black population for support in erecting defenses around the city. One “citizen of colour” appealed to black men to “exert ourselves...for

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<sup>496</sup> Letters from John Pintard to his Daughter, Eliza Noel Pintard Davidson, 1816-1833, in 4 vols. *Collections of the New York Historical Society* (1816-1833), 1:145.

<sup>497</sup> *New York Journal*, April 19, 1796.

the protection of our beloved state.”

Let no man of colour, who is able to go, stay at home on Monday next,  
but let every one assemble at 5 o'clock A.M. in the Park, to join with  
their brethren in their patriotic effort.<sup>498</sup>

But optimism concerning equality of opportunity and fair play for New York's African American population proved ill-founded. As Americans increasingly touted egalitarianism during the Jacksonian era, black men faced exclusion from the political process. Before 1821, both black and white voters in New York were bound by property and residency requirements. At the constitutional convention of that year, however, partisan politics and racial considerations resulted in the lifting of restrictions on white men and the virtual disfranchisement of blacks. The new constitution that was drafted imposed on blacks a residency requirement and limited the franchise to those among them who possessed real property of at least \$250.<sup>499</sup>

By the time the remaining bondsmen and women secured their freedom through the emancipation decree on July 4, 1827, African Americans had been present in New York for roughly 200 years. The city had benefited immeasurably from their labor, while employing repressive means to keep them in a subordinate position. Yet, New York blacks had withstood assaults on their humanity and had responded to oppression by drawing closer together. The cohesiveness of the black community was evident to a foreign observer who witnessed a celebration in 1825 in honor of slavery's imminent demise:

On the afternoon of the third of October, there was a great procession of

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<sup>498</sup> Still, *Mirror for Gotham*, 76.

<sup>499</sup> Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), 80-84.

negroes, some of them well dressed, parading through the streets, two by two, preceded by music and a flag. An African club, called the Wilberforce Society, thus celebrated the anniversary of the abolition of slavery in New York, and concluded the day by a dinner and ball. The coloured people of New York, belonging to this society, have a fund of their own, raised by weekly subscription, which is employed in assisting sick and unfortunate blacks...marshals with long staves walked outside of the procession. During a quarter of an hour, scarcely any but black faces were to be seen in Broadway.<sup>500</sup>

One hundred and seventy-eight years later (appropriately on October 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>), a primarily African-descended population gathered in lower Manhattan to pay tribute to the New York Africans whose role in the development of the colonial city had been virtually forgotten. Song and dance and prayers and praise were offered for the men, women, and children whose lives represented not simply the presence of unfree labor in New York but symbolized the operation of slavery throughout America. In honoring New York Africans, those assembled elevated all the nation's enslaved people from chattel to human beings. On that early fall weekend, black men and women were accorded their rightful place in the history of New York City and of the nation.

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<sup>500</sup> Still, *Mirror for Gotham*, 111-12.

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